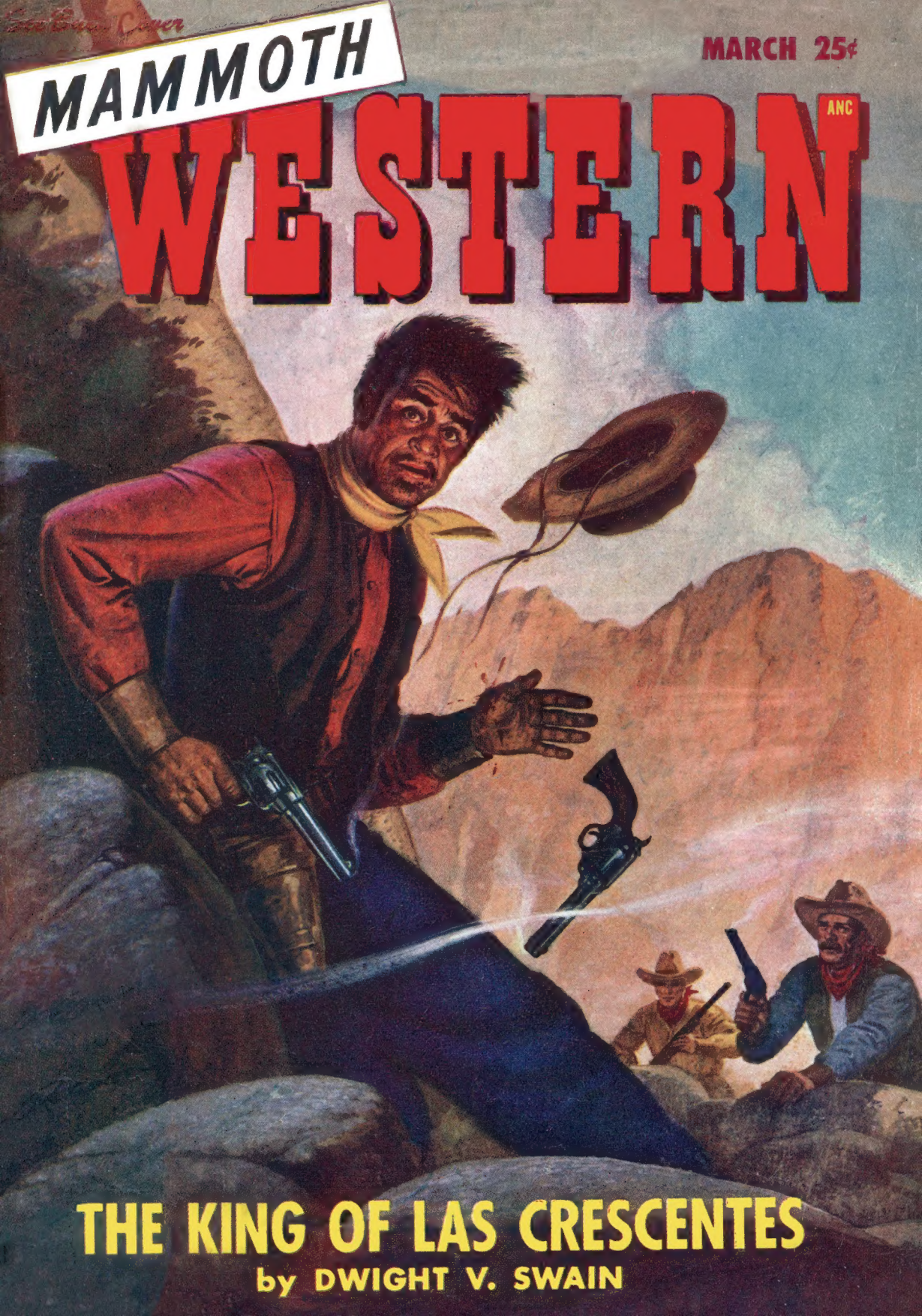
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VOLUME 4 **NUMBER 3**

All Stories Complete

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Las Crescentes was a ranch built of blood and gunfire—laced with tragedy!

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones illustrating
a scene from "The King of Las Crescentes."

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DWIGHT V. SWAIN'S name is no stranger to MAMMOTH WESTERN, and judging from what "our boy" has done with his current novel, "The King of Las Crescentes," it will continue that way. When you start to read this gem of a story, pull off your boots, light up your pipe, plant yourself near a warm fire and prepare to be completely absorbed until you've finished it. The "king's" family, the Holcum boys, Rance, Cole, and Thad, are real, living, two-gun men. These aren't names on a piece of paper; these are people, living, fighting, breathing, dying people. We got a particular bang out of Cole (we can tell this much without giving the story away) because he's bad, through and through. Yet if you watch him closely, you'll find a certain something in him that is appealing. Under other circumstances, he might have been another Rance. It isn't often that we go into raptures over a series of characterizations; in this case we had to. You're going to remember this story for a long, long time to come. And we're going to work on Dwight for another story soon. He's got something good!

WE'RE a little worried about over-doing this characterization business. Alexander Blade, who has done a lot of stories for MW, has given us this ringer—"High Gamble." The hero is a sort of Robin Hoodsy guy—after a while, that is. But when he got into a poker game ordinarily, he had one idea—to stay at all costs, even if he had to stack the deck, mark it, or deal from the bottom. Not that he was dishonest—not at all—it was just that poker playing of his variety was easier than making an honest living. Good old Morrisey—another first rate con man of the Western type—ruined by a woman! Read the story and we guarantee you'll not only laugh, you'll sympathize with the codger.

IN "Peace-Lovin' Man" by Hyatt Johnson, a stranger wanders into a little cow town and finds himself mixed up in a range feud. Here is a story that is jammed with action and sets that brilliant pace that has always made MW outstanding in its field. It involves a situation in which any roaming cow-hand looking for a job could get caught. Fortunately Hyatt's hero is a fast man with a gun!

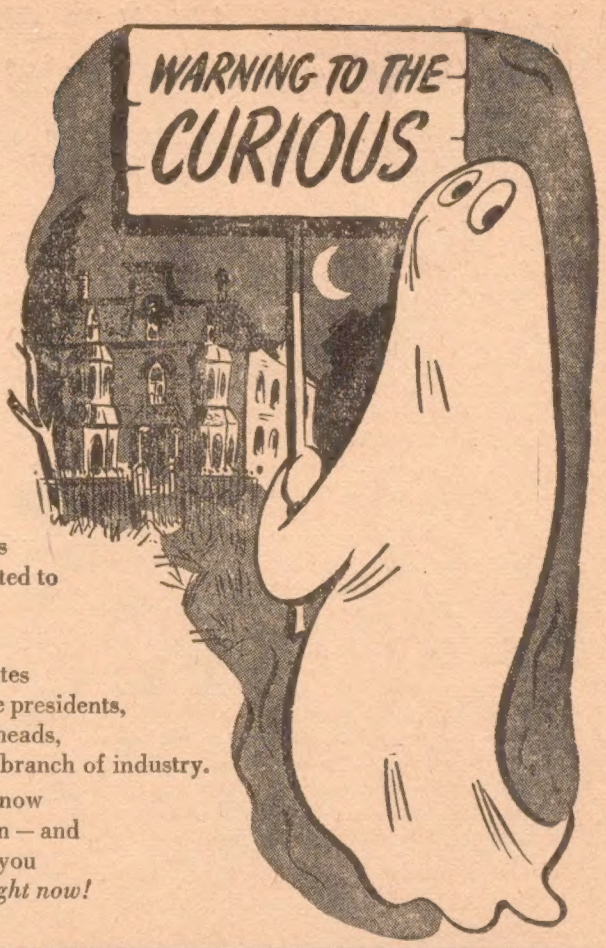
"CHET" GEIER'S story, "Haunted Valley," is another fine story. If anything, Geier is consistent. It is pretty hard to find an author that doesn't have his ups and downs. That isn't the case with Geier. Every story he has ever written has great merit. The kid's good and we predict that if he keeps up at this rate he's going to hit the "slicks" sooner or later. Incidentally, notice the illustrations for "Haunted Valley." Rod Ruth has the touch of the master. If that hooded, sheeted figure doesn't make you jump out of your clothes when you see it, we'll eat your shirt—no, we take that back—we have a habit of sticking out our necks—and getting them clipped!

BOB WILLIAMS' "The Trigger of the Gun" introduces a girl who's got some ideas about using one. The story is nicely done with a good twist to it. "The Valley of Betrayal" by H. B. Livingston brings up the old question of greed.

PAUL W. FAIRMAN'S "A Rope on the Mesa" is a terrific short-short with an O. Henry ending. There is impact and punch in this story. Reading it and coming to its unusual end is like being on the receiving end of a forty-five slug. Before Paul wrote this he came down to talk with us about it. We approved completely. Paul is an idea man of the first water. Keep that freshness, and we'll read it, Paul!

AS we write this editorial, we're almost ready to go to press, and we're fiddling around trying to decide which other stories we'll put in MW. There's a pile a foot high to choose from. We don't know what we'll take, but you can be sure that they'll be good. Here we go, reaching . . .

WE want to re-introduce an old feature in the magazine. You remember *The Reader Rides the Range?* It was the letters section of MW, where you readers had a chance to air your ideas and your opinions. We've talked to a lot of steady readers of MW who have dropped up to the office and practically all have asked about this feature. So . . . grab your pens, pencils and typewriters and start shooting letters this way. We plan to make a readers' department similar to the ones in our sister magazines, *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*—which are good reading, by the way. Load your "Remingtons," gang, and start the letters winging to us. Don't be afraid to gripe, and don't hesitate to praise. Give it to us from the shoulder. That's all for now. We'll be seeing you next month. RAP



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The KING of LAS CRESCENTES

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

Cole was a killer; Thad was a coward; and Rance was a fighting man—three brothers. They had a kingdom to fight for—founded on hate...

Rance drew and fired in one swift motion. He jumped backwards and sideways as he did it. The answering blast of lead missed

THE King lay dying.

Old King Holcum, the man who'd opened up this valley bounded by the three great crescent peaks. Living legend, curly wolf. Hell-raiser, stalwart, fighter, friend.

Lips lax now, eyes dull. Propped in his bed in a blanket, watching the lamps burn low.

The King of Las Crescentes.

Judge Vreeland sighed. The King was dying—and that meant the sands were running out for him, too.

The years rolled back. Back to the war and Carter's Legion, and trouble, and Reconstruction Texas. Just plain King Holcum and Ben Vreeland then. Riding by the grace of God and Mister Colt, through Comanche country and Kiowa country and the Apaches under Mangas Coloradas. Carving their destinies out of the wilderness. . . .

"You sent for me, King?" he asked gently.

The faintest of nods. A hand, bony as a buzzard's claw, gesturing.

"I'm through, Ben. Doc says I'll never last till morning. I want you to check all the papers before I go. The others are coming."

"The papers? The others—?"

The King's eyes were somber. "Vic Dorgan's buying me out."

"Vic Dorgan—!"

"Easy does it, Ben. Forget all that trouble. Old Man Dorgan's ten years in his grave, and the Double D's the only spread in the valley big enough to handle Las Crescentes."

"And will Yancey forget the trouble, too, King?" the judge asked softly.

"Yancey's ramrodding the Double D. He's not the owner. Once I've sold, Vic Dorgan can do the worrying about him." A spasm of coughing shook The King. His smile was made of pain. "No, Ben. I've made up my mind. You and me—we're part of the old days. We know how to handle Jud Yancey and his kind. But Thad can't do it, and I say it even if he is my own son. He's not cut out for a cattleman. If he tried to run this outfit, my Triple Crescent brand would be history in a year. The wolves would take the land on tax sale. That's why I want everything turned into cash. With a will, so Thad gets it."

The judge held his voice level.

"What about Rance, King? And Cole?"

"Don't speak their names!" The dying man trembled in sudden fury. His voice climbed. "A saddle tramp, and a wolf on the owlhoot! They left me—left me cold! Thad's the only one who's stuck by me!"

"But they're your blood. . ."

The King beat at the bed in a frenzy. "You heard me, Ben! I won't talk—"

He cut off short as the bedroom door opened. Thad, the youngest son, entered, too-handsome face almost eager.

"They're here, Father. Dorgan and Yancey. . ."

VIC DORGAN. Jud Yancey.

"Sit down," croaked The King.

Young Vic threw him an uncertain smile; obeyed.

Not Yancey. Arrogant, green eyes gleaming, he swaggered to the nearest corner, took his stand with his back to the wall in open insult. He kept his thumbs hooked in his belt, close to the butts of his guns.

Judge Vreeland breathed deep, ran fingers over his own worn Colt. Then, when King still said nothing: "We'll need witnesses, someone who's likely to be around awhile. Your foreman, Kilgore, say. And Kathie Bren. . . ."

Thad's smooth face worked nervously.

"I'll get them." He started for the door too hastily. Tripped over his own feet, half fell.

Jud Yancey laughed.

Thad went scarlet, started to turn.

Yancey's eyes stayed bold, contemptuous. His face was a saturnine devil-mask, his yellow teeth bared below the tobacco-streaked blond mustache.

Thad wavered. His eyes fell. He stumbled on out of the room, didn't even slam the door.

Judge Vreeland looked away.

Seconds, ticking by in painful silence. Then the door opened again. For Kilgore, King's foreman, this time. A big man, the biggest in Las Crescentes, six feet four and built to last. His close-set eyes widened a moment as he saw Dorgan and Yancey, then went dead once more, sullen as his mouth.

More seconds, more waiting. Then Kathie Bren, Thad's wife. Her brown eyes flicked to The King in a glance that spelled worry, grief. The red lips had lost their smile. The auburn ringlets didn't dance.

Thad himself, still flushed, eyes downcast.

Again Judge Vreeland looked away. "We'll take the sale first," he said.

"The sale—?" blurted Thad. His face twitched. "I—well—Judge—the will. . ."

"The will," King echoed.

"And you want Thad to have everything?"

A weary nod.

The judge sat very straight. Of a sudden anger was riding in him. His voice crackled in spite of him.

"Very well. It's your money." Abruptly, he rose. "Only damned if I'll help you do it, King. My belly won't take it. Go hire yourself another lawyer!"

"BEN!" choked the King.

"You heard me!" Judge Vreeland let his tongue run free. "Thirty years ago I rode in here from Texas with you. I've sided you in every scrap you've had, and I've backed your plays with cash and Colts. But I'm damned if I'll do it this time, King Holcum. Not when you turn on Rance and Cole for this lily-livered whelp Thad, who can't even wait till the place is sold to get your will signed for fear he'll have to split the take with his own two brothers!"

"Shut up!"

"I'll speak my piece till I'm finished. There's no one here big enough to stop me."

"Kilgore—!" King shouted.

The judge brought out his Colt in one smooth flow of motion.

"Bullets cut us all to a size, Kilgore. Are you having any?"

The big foreman shuffled his feet, stared at the floor.

"Thad? Do you want to try it?"

The King's youngest son wouldn't even meet Judge Vreeland's eyes.

Yancey laughed, as he had before. "Go ahead, Judge. It's all yours."

The judge swung back, faced Holcum.

"You've failed, King. You've built Las Crescentes to the biggest spread in the Territory, and you've raised three sons to follow after, and you've failed."

"Damn you, Ben! You can't say it—"

"I can and I do. You started by spoiling Cole—giving him too much rope, riding him with too loose a rein. He went bad. Today he's a killer, riding the high lines with the wild bunch. I say you put him there."

"Damn you, Ben—!"

"The second was Rance. You went hog-wild the other day with him, because you could already see the road that Cole was set to travel. You held him down tight, the way a breaker with a ghost cord holds a bronc. It didn't work. Rance would do to ride the river,

but he had your blood and your backbone. He wouldn't eat crow forever. He drifted. You haven't seen him in three years. You've been too damn' bull-headed even to try."

"But I stayed!" Thad broke in shrilly. He was shaking, breathing too fast. "I stuck with father. That's why he wants to leave me everything. You've got no right—"

"You!" Judge Vreeland put an edge to his voice. "You've stuck—and we all know why. With you, the Holcum strain ran thin. You didn't draw any backbone. From the start you've ridden on King's rep. You figured to stay here and claim his pile by default, just like you took Rance's girl Kathie as soon as he went away."

Kathie Bren came out of her chair, white to the lips.

"Judge! You can't say that! It's not true, not fair—!"

King Holcum cut in before the judge could answer. His words came slashing, bitter. The blue eyes were diamond bright as in the days long gone.

"The hell it isn't, Kathie! You were crazy for Rance. He drifted, so you took the next best thing—and found you'd drawn a joker!"

JUDGE Vreeland stared.

"King—!"

The King's lips twisted.

"What do you want me to say, Ben? That you're right? That I never could scare you worth a damn?" He laughed harshly. "You don't need me to tell you that. But you could have let me carry it off."

"But why?"

"Why not? What harm could it do now?" Slowly, the dying man shook his head. "Sure, I've failed. I know it just as well as you do. I've lain awake enough nights wrestling with it. Only now my cards are played out. Cole's got a price on his head. He couldn't come in to take over Las Crescentes if he wanted to. Rance is stubborn, like you say—just as stubborn as I am. He'll stay away."

"So?"

"So that leaves Thad, and he's not man enough to hold the Triple Crescent."

Thad's color drained. "Father—"

"Don't 'father' me, Thad. I know you. I know this valley, too, and the kind of sand it'll take to hold it." Old King's laugh was bitter. "How long do you think you'd last with Jud Yancey on your trail?"

And Yancey, mocking: "Not long, Holcum. Not long."

It was as if King Holcum hadn't heard him.

"Me, I've fought all my life, for everything I ever got. The Yankees, with Carter's Texas Legion. Davis and his State Police. Injuns and greasers and rustlers. I built this Las Crescentes spread on fighting, so I'd have something to pass on to my three boys."

"King, King. . . ." Judge Vreeland fumbled, hunted for words he couldn't find. There was pain in him, too, now, washing out the anger that had gone before.

"All that fighting, all those years. And now I'm ending up without my sons or spread. I'm venting my Triple Crescent brand for cash so Thad can go live in a city with Rance's girl, because he's not man enough to take up where I leave off." The blue eyes moved to Kathie Bren. They weren't quite so bright now. "I'm not blaming you, Kathie. You've tried to make Thad a good wife, but your heart's not in it. Don't waste yourself on him forever. Maybe you can still find Rance. . ."

Kathie's lips moved, but no words came. She whirled and fled the room.

For an instant, heavy silence.

Then Yancey: "Vic Dorgan and me came here for business, Holcum. Let's get on with it."

The ghost of a smile touched The King's grey lips. The blue eyes were almost mocking.

"Sorry, Yancey. I'm backing out. The Triple Crescent's not for sale—not to anyone."

"Like hell you'll back out—"

"There'll be no will. Cole and Rance get their share. Thad will have to take his chances."

Thad: "Father, you can't—"

Yancey started forward.

Judge Vreeland brought up his Colt again. He let his voice ring.

"You heard him! He's changed his mind!"

Yancey halted, hands working.

THAD said: "Don't worry, Yancey. The sale still goes through." His too-handsome face was suddenly twisted, vicious. "The doctor says he can't live till morning. You can buy my third then."

"Your third!" roared Yancey. His eyes blazed green fire. "Why would we want to buy your third, you damn' fool? We can take it away from you for nothing. It's Cole and Rance we want dealt out." He spun, started for the door. "Come on, Vic!"

"Hold it!" rapped the judge. His thumb hooked back the old Colt's hammer. "What about it, King? Shall I let them go?"

No answer. King Holcum's eyes were closed. His bony hands lay limp.

The judge breathed in sharply, felt for the pulse.

"Well?" rasped Yancey, his breath thick and heavy.

Judge Vreeland stood very still. Of a sudden the years were heavy upon him.

"You can go now, if you want to," he said. "The King is dead!"

CHAPTER II

Reluctant Prodigal

THERE were three of them—shabby, nondescript men with cold eyes and hard faces. They came on Rance Holcum at the Box Y line camp early in the morning, just as he'd finished saddling up his big bay gelding for the day's riding.

Without quite knowing why, Rance stiffened a fraction at the sight of them. Carefully casual, he led the bay around to the side of the shack, dropped the reins. Then, returning to the cook fire, he waved a greeting as the trio rode up.

"Howdy, boys. There's still coffee in the pot. Light and set awhile."

Their expressions didn't change. They made no move to get down.

"Rance Holcum?" the long, lank man in the middle queried.

Rance let his hand hang near his gun. He spoke warily.

"Holcum? No. He's off riding fence over on the northeast line."

"He's stallin', Charlie!" rasped the rider to Rance's left. "Look at that face! He's a Holcum, all right!"

The man's gun flashed up.

Rance drew and fired in one swift motion. He jumped sidewise and backwards as he did it. For an instant the corner of the line shack was between him and the strangers. He forked the bay with a leap that didn't even touch the stirrups, sank in his spurs and rode. Behind him he could hear the man he'd shot still shrieking curses.

Only getting away wasn't so easy as that. In seconds the trio was racing in pursuit, fanning out to pocket him. When Rance tried to veer off left towards Box Y headquarters, a saddle gun sent lead singing by too close for comfort.

Grimly, he reined about, spurred the

bay farther and farther back into the brush-studded foothills. With luck, he could circle to Bear Mountain pass before they realized what he was up to, ride through to the towns beyond and safety.

Minutes stretched into hours. Overhead the sun grew to a blazing ball of fire. But the trio clung like murderous leeches, even the man Rance had wounded. Apparently the bullet hadn't more than scratched him.

Rance drove the lathered, heaving bay up a new hill. He was beginning to wonder whether the animal would have strength to make the pass, at this rate.

A clump of brush. Pausing in its shelter, he glanced back again, checking his pursuers' positions.

There were only two riders behind him now.

Rance pivoted, searched the narrow valley off to the right towards Bear Mountain.

A flicker of horseflesh. A momentary glimpse of Stetson, dusty shirt.

They'd outguessed him, outridden him. He was cut off.

Before he could move, a shot rang out. The bay leaped, lurched, spilled down the slope.

Rance hurled himself clear, clawed his way back into the brush. Gun in hand, he crawled into a slot-like niche between two great boulders, lay flat and waited. The bay had ended its slide in a gully, dead. He could still see one shoulder sticking up an inch or so over the rim, and the sight made him a little sick.

THE voice of the long, lank man named Charlie: "I got him, I think! I saw him fall!"

Brush crackled. Sun glinted on metal. Cautiously, the rider spurred up the slope, probing the cover as he came.

Rance wormed out of his slot and around, moving above and parallel with the other's path until he reached another boulder, a dozen yards along his own back-trail from the gully where the dead horse lay.

The rider glimpsed the gelding, started forward faster.

Rance drew a bead, let out half a breath. He squeezed his Colt's trigger.

The hillside echoed the shot, sent the sound vibrating out across the valley. The lank man slammed out of his saddle; hit the ground, sprawled flat on his face. He didn't move. His horse shied violently, then ambled on a few steps and began cropping at a clump of grass.

The sun scorched the back of Rance's neck. Of the other two riders, no sight, no sound. A pair of tarantulas—huge, hairy—moved across the gravel a yard before his face, tracing lines and arcs and angles in a sort of grisly dance. Crimson began to trickle from beneath the fallen gunman's body.

Then, above Rance, a sudden rattle of stones, a whisper of scraping branches. He twisted, searched the sparse scrub and rocky ground.

A shot. The slug spattered Rance's face with sand, stinging fragments of stone. Dust puffed into his eyes.

He rolled wide, just ahead of a second bullet. Then, scrambling erect, dived headlong downhill towards Charlie's body and the gully where the bay lay.

But as he came up from cover, Charlie came up, too, anything but dead. Gun in hand, firing, short yards away.

Bullets plucked at Rance's shirt. He lunged for the other, slammed at the man's head with the Colt. Charlie went down again, clawing at him. Together, they rolled into the gully. Then Rance got in another blow. His adversary went limp.

Panting, Rance hugged the gully's

bottom. Then discovering that it was deep enough here for him to sit up without exposing himself to the two remaining killers' fire, he began to check on his condition.

A bullet had seared his ribs, leaving a hot, throbbing gash. Another had ripped through the fleshy part of his left upper arm, but fortunately, so far as he could tell, hadn't touched the bone. By ripping up his shirt, he managed makeshift bandages.

Charlie, too, was alive. Rance's original shot at him had mangled one shoulder—knocked him out for a few seconds, probably; or maybe, caught in the open, he'd just decided to play possum till the odds were more in his favor. Now, as the effects of the later pistol-whipping wore off, he was already beginning to moan and move.

Grimly, Rance lashed the unconscious man's hands with the remnants of the shirt, then peered out of their refuge under cover of the scattered brush that fringed one edge of the gully, scanning the slopes.

Off to the right, the Winchester spoke. Twigs snapped, inches from Rance's head. He ducked and stayed down.

Behind him, the man called Charlie moaned again.

A swift groundswell of anger gripped Rance. He swiveled just as the other opened his eyes.

He said: "Mister, your compadres have got us pinned down tight here, and it looks like an all-day party. Get ready to do some talking!"

THE lank man glowered. He didn't speak.

"I don't know any of you," Rance said. "That makes it a pay job. What I want to know is who hired it. And why."

"It ain't what you like that makes you fat. It's what you get."

"I've been drifting three years now," Rance said. "I've ridden for more outfits than you can shake a stick at, and some of the boys were my friends and some weren't. But the hire for three gunnies runs high. I doubt my hide's worth the price to anyone I've crossed since I've been traveling."

"That's what you think," the man called Charlie sneered.

Rance studied him soberly.

"That's what I think. And what backs it is the way you rode up and asked whether I was Rance Holcum." Abruptly, mirthlessly, he laughed. "That tore it, Charlie. I've used a lot of handles since I've been drifting. No real reason, just that I was sick and tired of having folks stare at me and say, 'Oh. Old King Holcum's boy.' So you wouldn't have been looking for me under my right name if you were hunting me for something I've done within the past three years."

The lank man just sneered.

"That shoves it right back to the valley and Las Crescentes, Charlie. That, and the way your side-kick said 'Look at that face! He's a Holcum, all right.' He'd seen other Holcums."

Still silence.

"And you knew where to find me, Charlie. That ties up, too. The only one back home that knew I was riding for the Box Y was old Judge Vreeland. We still swap letters once in a while."

For an instant the other's gaunt face stiffened. His right hand lifted a fraction. Then he stopped, shifted, dodged Rance's eyes.

"All right, Holcum. You got it. It was old Vreeland sent us."

Rance shook his head.

"Uh-uh. Not the judge. He's my friend. And even if he wasn't, he's got no reason to have me gunned down. Somehow, you found out from him

where I was, but he's not the one that sent you." A pause. "Who was it, Charlie?"

"Go to hell!"

Rance hefted his Colt meaningfully.

"You think you're scarin' me?" the lank man snarled. "Hell, I know about you, Holcum. You'd kill me in a fair fight, or shoot men to save your own neck like you did back there on the slope, but you won't push me under when I ain't got a chance."

"That's right, I won't," Rance agreed. "But I sure will sift through your pockets. Somehow—maybe it's the way your hand jerked up when I mentioned Judge Vreeland and I still swap letters—all of a sudden I've come down with a notion that the coyote that hired you gave you something in writing to go by." He grinned, started towards his prisoner on hands and knees. "I'm betting you've still got it with you, Charlie!"

The lank man's face contorted.

"The hell with that!" He jerked his legs up, smashed at Rance's head with his feet with the speed of a rattler striking.

RANCE rolled sidewise. The boots grazed his shoulder, toppled him off balance. His gun spun wild.

Charlie surged up, erect, right foot drawn back for another kick. Rance could see him straining to break free his hands.

Then the carbine roared from down the slope. The man called Charlie rose on tiptoe; tottered, fell. He was dead before he hit the ground, the back blown out of his head.

The letter was in the lank man's shirt pocket. A letter without a postmark, addressed to him, Rance Holcum, at the Box Y. Three long sheets covered with old Judge Vreeland's thin, spidery script.

It was so simple, really. Back at Las Crescentes someone wanted him dead, someone who knew the judge still kept in touch with him. A case of whiskey to the drunken postmaster probably had done the rest.

Slowly, he read.

"Your pa is dead. He didn't make a will, so what he leaves will be divided according to law, and you of course can claim a full share. . . . Cole can, too, though I doubt he would be damned fool enough to risk his neck trying, what with a price on his head dead or alive. I don't know where he is, so I can't write, but I have put out the word where I think it will do the most good, and maybe the moccasin telegraph will get through to him. . . . Las Crescentes is going to pieces already just like King said it would. Thad has bit off more than he can chew. He hasn't got the sand and savvy to make it go. . . . Dorgan and Yancey (or maybe it's the other way around) are at work. One way or another, they figure to take over. They're paying fighting wages now, and there's lots of new faces. . . . The shoestring outfits in the hills have worked up a wire cutters' war, running off Triple Crescent stock hand over fist. Kilgore has all his hands out riding guard and mending fence, and he says he still can't keep wire up overnight. . . . I think Kathie Bren probably is having it worst of all. The King and I had ourselves a small fight over who he should leave the place to, and in the course of things it came pretty clear that everyone figured she married Thad just because you'd gone off. Thad was too yellow to do anything at the time, but I don't doubt he's ridden her hard enough about it since. Abusing a woman is about his speed. Couple that with the way the valley is filling up with Double D gunslingers, and you can see why I'm afraid for what may happen

to her. . . . It would make us all (except Thad and Yancey, maybe) mighty happy to see you back at Las Crescentes. I stuck my neck away out to persuade your pa not to make Thad his sole heir, just on the chance that you would be willing to take a chance on running the place the way it should be. You might not be able to save it now, even if you came, but at least you'd give the wolves a run for their money. But you being King Holcum's boy and a stiff-necked, stubborn, bit-in-the-teeth young mule to boot, I don't suppose hoping will do any good. . . ."

A SORT of sickness twisted at Rance's stomach. The past came back to life.

Las Crescentes. His father. Cole, Thad, Yancey, Dorgan, Kilgore, Judge Vreeland. That night, three years ago.

The old man, thundering: "You'll do as I say, damn you! You'll heel or get out!"

His own voice—tight, tremulous. "If I go, I won't come back!"

"You heard me! Heel or get out!"

He'd never returned.

And now?

The drifters' way was best. Instinctively, he knew it. Work a roundup, then loaf away the pay in town. Ride the chuck-wagon circuit. Anything, so long as he kept on traveling. Leave the money and the trouble and Las Crescentes to Thad to lose. For himself, he did all right on a cowhand's forty per.

Only. . . .

Only there were ghosts along the drifters' trail. Ghosts of Yancey, sneering, and the smirk on Dorgan's face. Of Cole, cold-eyed, and old Judge Vreeland, and The King.

Angrily, aloud, he said: "To hell with it! Let Thad stew in his own mess!"

But then the other ghost came up, the brown-eyed ghost with auburn hair.

". . . I think Kathie Bren probably is having it worst of all. . . ."

Kathie was still at Las Crescentes. The same Kathie who'd said she'd be his wife.

But Kathie hadn't waited. Kathie had married his brother Thad. And already the long, lank man called Charlie lay dead beside him, signpost on the road to Las Crescentes. No one but a double-damned fool would take that trail.

A brown-eyed ghost with auburn hair. . . .

Warily, he peered over the gully's rim once more, studied the lay of the land. It would be tricky business at best, but the brush was thick over there to the lift. If he could make the first clump. . . .

Even the thought brought sweat trickling. He grinned sourly, tightened his belt.

"I always was a double-damned fool. Las Crescentes, here I come!"

CHAPTER III

COLE TAKES CARDS

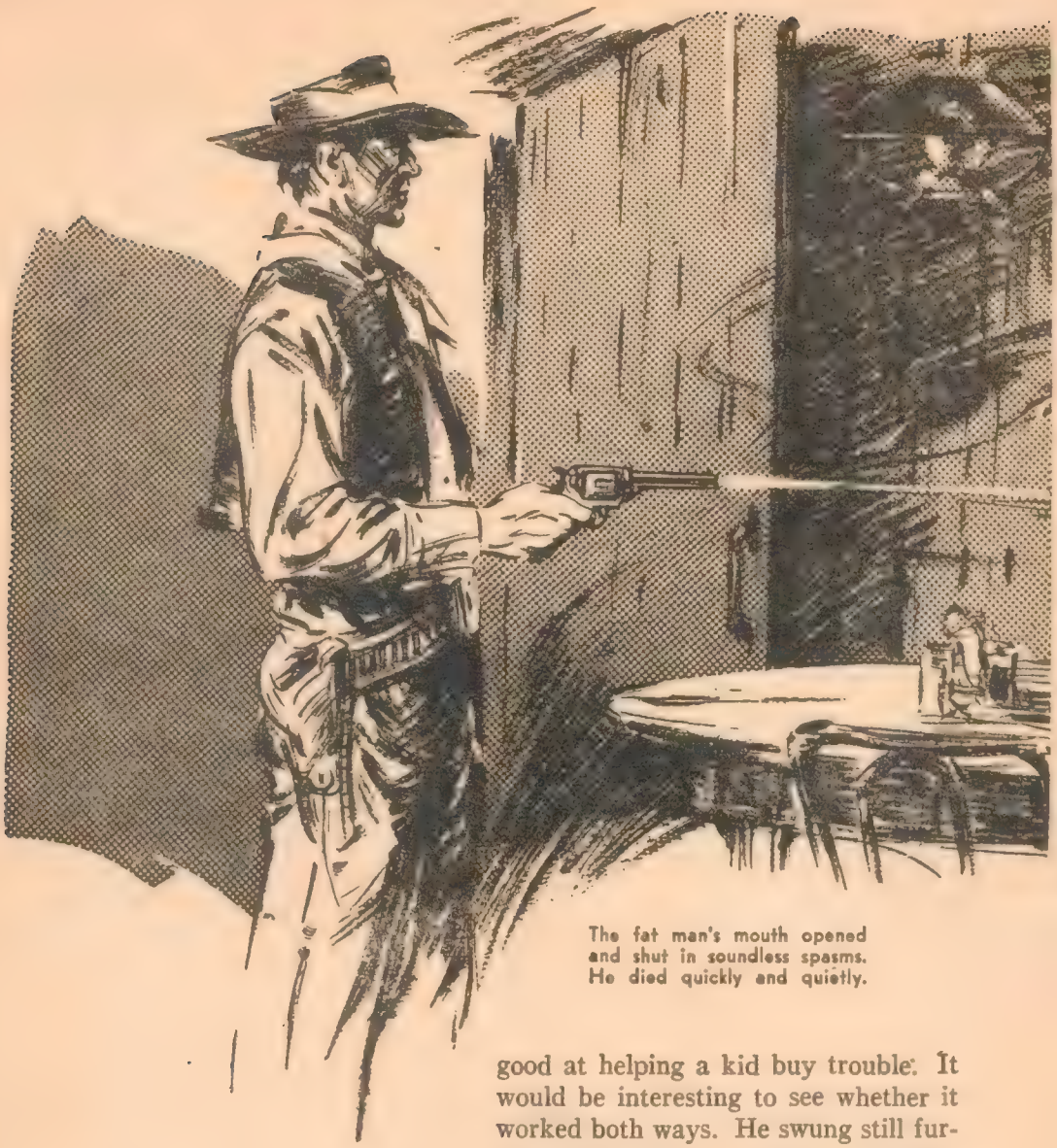
LAS CRESCENTES. Valley of the three great crescent peaks.

Motionless, chill, Cole Holcum surveyed it. He could see it all from this vantage point high on El Centro, the towering middle mountain.

Las Crescentes. The old man's empire, mile stretching on mile. Loot for the taking—legal loot, this time, one third his. Providing he lived long enough to collect.

He laughed harshly. He'd live, all right, and he'd collect. And God help the man who stood in his way!

Touching spurs to his great black, he edged carefully down the mountain, searching the folded grey-green hills below till he sighted Magruder's Cracker Box, half hidden in the bunchy brush



The fat man's mouth opened and shut in soundless spasms. He died quickly and quietly.

and cottonwoods that fringed Go-Devil Creek.

A great little place, Magruder's. A deadfall worthy of Robbers' Roost or Brown's Park or the Hole-in-the-Wall. Just like its owner—greasy, big-paunched Magruder, with his shifty eyes and the scar tissue where a Cheyenne brave had lopped off an ear.

Cole grinned. Magruder had been good at helping a kid buy trouble. It would be interesting to see whether it worked both ways. He swung still further west, came in behind the place, then studied it a moment through a screen of branches for signs of danger.

No sounds, no horses. Satisfied, he pushed the black forward, peered through the nearest window.

Magruder lay snoring on the bar.

Cole chuckled without mirth. Dismounting, he slid silently through the back door, checked the place room by room.

All empty.

He returned to Magruder. Took in the rolls of fat, the greasy, stubbled face.

Once he'd thought this man was hard and smart and tough. Now. . . . He laughed sourly, dug his Colt's muzzle hard into the bulging belly.

Magruder jerked awake. His eyes flared panic.

"Cole Holcum!" He began to shake. "It wasn't my fault, Cole. Honest it wasn't. I didn't help 'em get onto you—"

"Forget it."

A vast relief flooded the greasy face. The red-rimmed eyes flicked to the gun.

"Put that thing down, Cole. You got a rep for a touchy trigger finger. It makes me jumpy."

Wordless, Cole stepped back, returned the gun to its low-slung, tied-down holster.

The fat man made a nervous, fawning show of cordiality.

"It sure is good to see you back, Cole. I shoulda knowed you wouldn't hold no grudge for that business all these years. Only you scared me, comin' on me like that. I ain't so young as I used to be. I spook easy now." He slid to the floor,

fumbled a bottle, two glasses, onto the bar. "Here, have a drink. On me. You know, to old times."

"To old times." Cole let his lips twist. He drained his glass.

"What . . . what you doin' in the valley, Cole? They want you bad. There's bounty hunters would turn you in for the reward."

Cole set down his glass.

"I hear my old man's dead."

The fat man nodded.

"That makes a third of Las Crescentes mine." An echoing pause. "I came down to collect, Magruder."

"Collect—? You're crazy, Cole! They'll stretch your neck—"

"I doubt it. It's one thing to hang an owlhooter on the dodge without an honest dollar in his pocket. The biggest rancher in the Territory is something else again."

"You're crazy," Magruder muttered. He kept shaking his head.

"I hear the spread's having a rough time. The word's gone out that Dorgan's Double D is paying fighting wages."

Silence.

"Maybe you better tell me about it, Magruder."

The fat man's jowls quivered.

"I wouldn't know, Cole. Honest. Things ain't like they used to be here. I just run a saloon now."

DELIBERATELY, Cole brought his gun up out of the holster, laid it on the bar.

"My hearing must be getting bad, Magruder. I almost thought I heard you say you didn't know."

Magruder's tongue flicked over thick lips. His greasy face glistened.

"You got me wrong, Cole—"

Cole picked up the gun.

"All right, all right!" The pudgy hands flapped. "I just don't want you to buy yourself no trouble. . . ."

"Talk."

"It's . . . it's Yancey, Cole." A shudder rippled through the rolls of fat. "I'm so scared of that dirty son I bleed white, an' you know I don't scare easy." More lip-licking. "He's bad, Cole. Plain poison. I know lots more about him than I did when you was here. He's a gun-slingin' fool, a Texas killer. They say he backed Ben Thompson down once, 'way back before he came to the valley."

"What kind of a play does he plan?"

"I dunno, Cole. Honest. He don't say nothin'. But I know the signs. He keeps pullin' in fightin' hands, an' he ain't doin' that for fun. Some day he'll cut loose, an' then. . . ."

"Where does young Dorgan stand?"

"Vic? Hell, Cole, you know him. He's just a dumb kid. He's scared of Yancey, but he don't know how to get rid of him. When the time comes, you can bet Yancey damn' well plans to take the Double D along with the Triple Crescent."

"What's the other trouble I hear about? The rustling? The fence cutting?"

"That's just the little outfits, Cole. Them sticky-rope spreads up in the hills. They figger Las Crescentes is done, so they're gettin' theirs while they got the chance."

Cole laughed harshly.

"I like that, Magruder. I like that a lot." He lashed out suddenly, caught the fat man by the throat. His voice rang fury. "What kind of damn' fool do you think I am? You think you can make me believe those boys got together by accident?" He shook Magruder. "Talk, damn you! Who's ramrodding 'em? Who put 'em up to it? Is it one of Yancey's schemes to keep Las Crescentes busy till he's ready?"

"I don't know, Cole. Before God, I

don't know!" Magruder began to pant.

"Yancey—"

"Yancey's keepin' his nose clean, Cole. Honest. He won't touch a blotted brand. If he's in it, nobody knows. . . ."

"Then who's working at it? Who's running the show?"

"The . . . the Trents. The Evans's. The Flakes. All that crowd." The fat man writhed. "For God's sake, Cole! That's all I know. Every bit. . . ."

FOR a long moment Cole stared into the shifty, scheming eyes. Took in, once more, the rolls of fat, the obscene softness. He let go his grip on the other's throat. Ever so slowly, racked back the hammer of his Colt.

The fat man saw it. The red-rimmed eyes came up, gone wide with terror. The bulbous body shook.

"Cole—!"

"You should kick, Magruder. This is the easy way. If I let you go, you'll spill your guts to Yancey—and then I'd have to kill you an inch at a time."

The fat man's mouth opened and shut in soundless, anguished spasms.

Cole grinned.

"So long, Magruder!"

He let the hammer fall.

Magruder dead was a disappointment, all stubble and sunken eyes and sodden flesh. But his death had been necessary, even apart from the sweetness of revenge, so Cole counted it a job well done.

Leaving the corpse where it had fallen, he reloaded the emptied chamber of his Colt, paced slowly back to his waiting black, considering. Overhead, the sky was a dozen shades of grey, a sea of scudding clouds. The realization of it decided him.

By nightfall, he was high in the hills by the tiny Evans' spread. He knew the three brothers well, from days gone by, well enough to figure them close to the heart of any deviltry.

"Cole" Holcum

The little clump of weathered shanties that made up the Evans' home ranch lay in a little hollow, away from the wind. Carefully, Cole chose a spot just below the crest of the rise, where he could watch the place yet be fairly secure from observation himself.

Windows glinted hazy yellow light. A woman's shrill laugh drifted out to him. Voices rose and fell in fragments like the distant buzz of bottle flies.

Slowly, the chill of night came down. Cole shivered. But he felt satisfaction as well as discomfort. The darkness had fulfilled the cloudy day's promise. From a long-rope's standpoint, it was too perfect to let pass—thick, murky, moonless.

Down in the hollow, doors began to open and close. Lanterns glinted.

Cole limbered his fingers.
Cole carefully drew his bead.
Cole slowly pulled the trigger.

There was a shuffle of feet, a jingle of harness. Dust drifted the breeze. Cole caught the dim silhouettes of three riders: the Evans's themselves, Will, Anse and Murray. He grinned, rose stiffly, swung into his saddle.

His quarry wasn't too hard to follow, and that in itself was a sign. Normally, on a raid like this, they'd have ridden water for miles, then maybe cut a pattern up along El Centro's trackless high rock ledges.

Instead, they pressed straight for the Las Crescentes line.

COLE fell back till they were out of earshot. Then, putting spurs to the black, rode fast around them, heading them off. By the time they reached the line he had his Winchester out of the saddle boot and was hunkered in the dirt where he could gain the advantage of what there was of skyline.

One of the three shadowy figures rode a few yards north along the fence, another south. The third fumbled at the wire. It parted, strand by strand, with a vibrant *ping!*

Cole limbered his fingers.

The two outposts were coming back now. The third man was pulling away the wire.

Cole drew his bead.

"All clear, Anse?" one brother asked.

Cole pulled the trigger. The man who had spoken slammed out of his

saddle.

Cole levered the Winchester, fired three times more. The night erupted a bedlam of shots and shouts and screaming horses.

Silence again. Empty, echoing silence through which boughs sighed and night winds whispered.

A man moaned, cursed brokenly.

Cole wormed forward, checked the nearest body.

Anse Evans. Dead.

Off to one side, another lump. Murray Evans, this time. Dead.

One more. The wounded man. Will Evans.

Cole rose.

"Will?" he asked softly. Then dropped fast on the off chance the other might still be able to shoot.

"Go to hell!"

"Not yet." Cole chuckled. "Got you in the shoulder, didn't I? Had to get one of you alive. That's why I let you have it first."

"Do I know you?" The wounded man's voice had a bewildered sound.

Cole could see the other's ready gun now. He lunged forward, kicked the weapon away. Then struck a match, cupped it to show his face. "Remember?"

"Cole Holcum!"

Cole flicked out the match.

"Who's the big augur on this war, Will?"

"You gunned us down!" the fallen man muttered uncomprehendingly. "Cole, you gunned us—"

"I want the augur."

"But you rode with us, Cole. . . ."

"That was before. I own this spread now. That makes you just one more cow-thief to me." Cole hunkered down. "Who's ramrodding this war?"

"Go to hell!"

COLE shrugged. Wordless, he began to gather up dry grass and twigs from the meager brush that grew here and there along the fence. Arranging it carefully, he touched a match to it, stepped back while it blazed into a tiny, crackling fire.

The wounded man watched in a sort of paralyzed fascination.

The fire burning to his satisfaction, Cole turned to Will Evans once more. He caught the wounded man's leg, jerked off the boot before the other had time to realize what was happening. Then, from his own boot top, he produced a sort, slim running iron.

Sweat came on Evans' face.

"Cole, you wouldn't—?"

Cole poked the iron into the fire. Waited while it grew cherry red before he rose again, held it smoking and glowing in his hand.

He said: "I want the augur. The quicker you tell me, the quicker I'll let you die."

He shoved the iron between Will Evans' toes. . . .

CHAPTER IV

Blood and Booty

THE bottle was half empty before Kilgore came; and even so it was still morning.

Unsteadily, Thad Holcum rose, stared into the mirror at his own sagging, unshaven face. He laughed—the meaningless, sodden laugh that came so often these days. He hated that laugh and all it stood for. But he needed the red-eye whiskey to dull the world about him, and with the whiskey came the laugh.

Then Kathie's image appeared in the mirror, coming from the kitchen. There was a new pallor about her face, new dark hollows below the brown eyes. And because he knew they were there because of him, the sight of them raised Thad to silent, seething fury. He bit down hard.

She said: "Kilgore's here, Thad. I heard him ride in with the boys." Her hand touched his arm. "You've got to stop, Thad. You can't go on drinking this way!"

He struck at the hand savagely, dashed it away.

"Who says I've got to stop? You?" The syllables slurred in spite of him. "Y'oughta be glad. Y'get ridda me, maybe. Tha's whatcha want, isn't it?" He clawed up the bottle, drank from it.

A knock came at the back door.

Thad drew himself together with drunken dignity. It took effort even for that. He hadn't really wanted that last drink, only there had been a recklessness upon him, a bitter determination to cut loose his wolf and be damned.

He tried to walk a straight line to the door. Stumbled and nearly fell instead.

Kilgore stood waiting. His eyes traveled over Thad—sulen, contemptuous. His beefy face was set.

"Well?" Thad tried to make his voice hard.

The big foreman shrugged.

"Another cut in the northeast fence."

"And of course they didn't leave a trail?" Thad sneered. "These wire cutters ought to go into the breeding business. They seem to know how to make horses grow wings."

"Nothin's stoppin' you ridin' out yourself, any time you reckon you can do better." Kilgore spat in studied insolence. "Only this time they didn't need to leave no trail. They was there when we got there."

Thad started to speak; stopped short.

"You—you caught 'em?"

"Hell, no. We didn't have to." Kilgore spat again. "They was dead, all three of 'em."

"Who?"

"The Evans boys, Will an' Anse an' Murray. Anse an' Murray was gunshot. Will, too, only somebody'd played

with him for a while with a brandin' iron before they finished him off."

Thad began to shake. He stumbled out, slumped to a seat on the steps. When he tried to speak, the words came out a whisper.

"Jud Yancey?"

Again Kilgore shrugged.

"Dunno. We lost whoever did it up in the rock on El Centro." Slowly, he tugged the makings from his pocket, rolled himself a cigarette. "I doubt it was Yancey. He ain't got no reason. Besides, the sign showed it for a one-man job, an' Jud don't have to ride alone these days."

"How many head did we lose?"

"None. There wasn't a cow-track in a mile."

THAD stared at the ground. The news had shocked much of the drunkenness out of him. Now he tried to make his brain work, think through to some solution, some decision. Only none came.

He said: "You back-tracked, too?"

"Why bother?" Kilgore puffed at his quiry. His manner was that of a man dealing with a not-too-bright child. "I reckon 'most anyone could figger out they come from the Evans's spread, one way or another. And the Evans's never hired no hands, so why go there?"

Thad felt the heat climb his face. The liquor in him flicked at his raw nerves.

"Sure. You can figure it out in a hurry, once they're dead." Deliberately, he sneered. "Funny thing, Kilgore: somebody else can find these fence cutters without any trouble and gun 'em down. But you can't."

The Triple Crescent foreman's beefy face went dark. One ham-like hand shot out, caught Thad by the shirt-front, dragged him up bodily like a half-grown boy.

"THAD" HOLCUM

"Shut up, you, before your damn' lip gets too big for your backbone!"

For an instant Thad stiffened. His fists knotted.

Then the fear swept through him—the swirling tide of utter panic that always rose at times like this. He stood statue-like, frozen.

Kathie's voice came sharp from the doorway.

"Stop it, Kilgore! Let him go!"

They both turned. Stared at the shotgun in her hands.

Kilgore laughed. With elaborate care he pushed Thad back, released him.

"It's your wife's hand, Mister Holcum." His lips curled on the "Mister." He pivoted, started to lumber off towards the bunkhouse. Then halted, half turned. "Just remember: any time you don't like the way I ramrod this here spread, just say the word an' I'll roll my bed. Then you can see how you like bracin' Jud Yancey for your-

self!"

He strode on, bootheels kicking dust.

Thad could feel the sweat come on his forehead, turn icy in the breeze.

Again, Kathie's voice: "I'm sorry, Thad. I was afraid. . . ."

Hate and shame swept over him.

"You—!" he snarled. It came out a sob.

He lunged for the doorway, shoved her aside so hard she careened against the wall, half falling.

He drank straight from the bottle.

AFTERNOON. ANOTHER BOTTLE.

Hoofbeats, coming closer. A jingle of spurs. Feet thudding on the steps.

Blearily, Thad stared through the open door.

A man, striding towards him.

Their eyes met, locked.

Of a sudden Thad's breath came short. He barely heard the clatter of bottle and glass falling to the floor.

"Rance!"

RANCE. Older, now; heavier. With steady eyes and a weathered, strong-lined face. His spurs were California, and the silver conchas of the straps with which the chains had been replaced showed the work of a Yaqui smith. His Stetson looked like Montana, and he wore a canvas jacket straight out of the brush country.

A nod. Grave eyes flicking to the fallen bottle. "Howdy, Thad."

"What . . . whatcha doin' in Las Crescentes?"

"Heard you had trouble, Thad." The gloved hand touched a low-slung Colt. "Thought maybe I could buy a piece."

And then, Kathie, face pale as rice flour.

"Rance—!"

The grave grey eyes, veiling; features suddenly set. The slightest bow. "Missus Holcum."

She choked. Her face went whiter still. "I have some baking . . ." She darted from the room.

Thad picked up the bottle. He couldn't stop his hand from shaking.

"Trouble . . ." He held his eyes to the floor to hide the things he knew they'd show. "Damn' fool, tha's whatcha are. Yancey'll eatcha for breakfas'. You, 'n' Kilgore, too. . . ."

"Maybe." Uninvited, Rance pulled up a chair, sat down "Only I'm not such a damned fool as you might think. Somebody sent the trouble to me. I didn't even know pa was dead till they tried to gun me down—three of 'em; professionals." A pause. "Two of 'em are buzzard-bait, back on the Box Y. The other high-tailed it for the tall timber, but I figured it was time to come in. If somebody wants me dead bad enough to hunt me up, the least I can do is meet 'em half way."

Thad uncorked the bottle, pulled at it long and hard.

He said: "So you're back. Y'let someone else stay here 'n' work, but soon's the ol' man dies, you're back."

"You're drunk."

"Drunk? Sure, I'm drunk." Thad laughed, listened to the sound roll out, half nerves, half liquor. "You go 'way while I stay here 'n' work. On'y the ol' man loves y' for it, you 'n' Cole. Th' bum 'n' the owlhoot. Th' saddle tramp 'n' th' killer." He laughed again. "Ol' King Holcum dies without a will, so you two yacks c'n grab your thirds—"

"Shut up, Thad."

"An' 'nother thing—" Thad raised his voice to a bellow. "Kathie! Gah'-damn' you, Kathie! Get in here!"

Wordless, defiant, head held high, his wife moved into the kitchen doorway.

"See 'er, Rance? Your ol' gal. 'S my wife now. Y'wan' her, too? Take 'er 'long with th' spread. She ain'

worth a damn' t'me." His voice went shrill. "Take it all, damn' you—th' cash 'n' th' gal 'n' th' spread—"

He screamed as Rance's fist slashed at his jaw. . . .

TWO things had happened by the time Thad came to: he was as wretchedly ill as only rotgut whisky can make a man, and his mind was made up.

Then, finally, the illness passed, leaving only a headache, nausea and a sour stench to mark its going. He found himself able to look up at Rance from the horsehair couch on which he lay; even to manage a grin of sorts.

"My God, what a drunk!" he sighed.

Rance grinned back, nodded.

"You tied one on, all right."

"And Rance"—careful, calculated sheepishness—"I guess I said some pretty nasty things, too. Only that was whiskey talking, Rance. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Forget it."

"Where's Kathie? I want to tell her, too."

As before, she appeared in the doorway. "It's all right, Thad."

"Thanks, Kathie. And . . . I'll make it up to you." Thad turned back to Rance. "Rance, boy, if it's trouble you're wanting, we've got it." Again, sheepishness. "I guess I'm just not man enough to handle it, Rance. I still need my big brother to side me."

Rance sat silent. Thad swallowed hard, hurried on.

"You know the deal. The little outfits are whittling us down till Yancey's brought in enough gunhands to make his play." He eyed his brother. "I think he plans to take Vic Dorgan's Double D, too, Rance. Vic's buffaloed already."

Still Rance said nothing.

It frightened Thad a little. He caught himself wondering if he could

"RANCE" HOLCUM

have given himself away while unconscious. If his thoughts showed in his eyes.

But he had to go ahead.

"Remember the Evans boys?"

Rance nodded.

"Kilgore says they were killed last night. They were cutting our fence at the time."

"Who did it?"

Thad shrugged.

"That's what I wanted to know. Only Kilgore seemed to want to let it go at that. I'm not too sure of Kilgore, Rance. It just isn't in the cards to miss these fence cutters as regular as he does."

"So?"

"If we could check on the Evans's—"

"I could ride out," Rance said.

"Would you?"

"Any time."

"Let's make it now, then." Abruptly—almost too abruptly, considering the state of head and stomach—Thad rose. "I've got to go into town

myself. We'll ride off together. That'll throw Kilgore off if he's mixed up in it. As soon as we're away, you can cut cross-country up to the Evans place. Stay there a couple of days. Scout around and find out just what's going on."

RANCE nodded. Together, they saddled up. In a matter of minutes they were on their way. Rance then cut off according to plan, as soon as they were well out of sight of the home ranch, leaving Thad to ride on alone to the tiny crossroads village that was the valley's only settlement.

It was the longest ride Thad had ever made. Now that he was sober again, his first rage cooled, the horror of the thing he proposed to do loomed ever larger. The thought of liquor made his stomach turn, yet when he reached the town he sought the first saloon. He was still standing there, foot on brass rail, glass in hand, when Kilgore entered.

The big man came up fast. A smirk twitched at his face.

"News, boss. Rance came back after you left. He's there with your wife now." He licked his lips. "I rode in to tell you. I figgered you'd want to know."

Thad clung to the bar. He didn't dare speak.

How long had it haunted him? How many nights had he lain awake?

Rance, his own brother. Kathie, his wife.

Old King Holcum: *"Kathie, you were crazy for Rance. He drifted, so you took the next best thing—and found you'd drawn a joker!"*

The glass rattled on the bar. As in a dream, Thad turned, stumbled out into the dusty street.

The El Dorado. That was the place. Home base for the Dorgan-Yancey gunhands, where the wrong ears could hear the right things, just as he'd planned.

A few well-chosen, convincingly drunken words. Jud Yancey would do the rest.

He reeled to the El Dorado's batwing doors. Lunged through with sodden bravado.

Hostility ringed him in a solid wall.

"Well?" the bartender glowered.

Thad Holcum sucked in air. A hymn of hate sang through his veins.

"Drinks for the house!" he shouted; hiccupped. And then, leaning forward in simulated drunken confidentialness: "Y'can tell Jud Yancey he's done. M' brother Rance is back. He's up at th' Evans place now, 'n' when he comes down we're gonna sweep this valley clean!"

CHAPTER V

Betrayal

RANCE waited till his brother Thad was out of view on the road to town, then reined about, galloped back towards the home ranch. He had to see Kathie, talk to her. The check on the Evans spread could wait.

Her loveliness was still a disturbing thing. Yet basically Rance knew it was her attitude that rankled most—her knack of looking through him with neither warmth nor coolness, as if he were part of the furnishings, dirt under foot; the way she'd avoided being left alone with him this morning.

There had to be an answer, if he could only find it.

He reached the house, dismounted. Strode in belligerently.

Kathie sat sewing by the table. She looked up as he entered. Her face stiffened.

"I didn't hear you knock," she said.

Confusion turned Rance's bitterness

to malice.

"I seldom knock on my own door. Or had you forgotten this place is mine as much as Thad's?"

Wordless, she rose, started for the hall that led to the bedrooms. Rance's anger cooled.

He said: "Kathie—! That was out of turn. I apologize. I didn't come here to fight with you. . . ."

"Then why did you come?"

"You were engaged to me, but you married Thad before the dust settled on my tracks. I thought maybe you'd want to tell me why. I guess I was wrong."

"Tell you why?" An expression he couldn't read flickered across her face; then was replaced by sudden color. "I think that should be plain enough without any further explanation, Rance."

"I don't. When you went up to Kansas City to visit your aunt, you were practically engaged to me. You said you'd marry me as soon as I worked things out with pa. He and I tangled instead, and I had to drift. I figured to get a place, bring you on sooner or later. Only you never answered my letters. The first thing I knew, Judge Vreeland wrote you'd married Thad."

Kathie's color fled again. She leaned against the door-jamb, breasts rising and falling too fast, brown eyes suddenly dark and fathomless. It came to Rance, with a sort of pain, that she was lovelier than ever. That whatever she might have lost in freshness had more than been made up in a richer, deeper beauty.

"Well?" he pressed.

He could see her draw a breath.

"I think you'd better go now, Rance."

"I don't. I want to know what happened." He gripped her arms, shook her. "Tell me, damn you! What was it?"

"Rance, you're hurting me. . . ."

He let her go, but his anger still surged higher.

"I want answers! What changed your mind? Or were you just a cheap little thing to begin with, with Las Crescentes on your mind instead of me?"

The brown eyes blazed. Her open palm stung his face.

"Get out! Get out, you coward! Thad should kill you!" And then, all at once like ice again: "Your presence here is unwelcome. I'm asking you to go!"

DOURLY, Rance rode away. He'd made a fool of himself, and he knew it. He wished he'd had the sense to keep on drifting.

But the way he felt at the moment, sense seemed to be the thing he had least of. He was here, in this valley, and Thad had asked him to help scout out the Evans place, and blood was blood. Common decency demanded that he go ahead with the job, take out his aggravation in hard riding.

The hills where the Evans brothers had their spread lay northeast of Triple Crescent headquarters, a long and grueling ride away. But a good ride for Rance. One that showed him strayed and injured stock, unbranded yearlings, fences down with neglect as well as from the wire cutters, good land let go to barren gullies—a thousand and one signs of Thad's incompetence, neglected details that would have driven old King Holcum to flaming wrath.

Then, as last, he crossed the Las Crescentes line, pushed higher into the bleak, unfruitful foothills, country where even sheep would be hard pressed for graze. It baffled Rance why anyone would even try to run cattle in such

a country. Yet he knew that the shoestring outfits not only tried, but managed to prosper after a fashion, spotting their cows in handfuls in isolated patches of grass so small the big spreads wouldn't have bothered with them.

Of course, no doubt it helped the shoestringers a good deal that they felt no scruples about keeping their ropes on their horns so far as the big valley outfits were concerned, even before this recent serious fence cutting got under way. . . .

Rance topped a ridge, paused to let his horse blow while he looked over the lay of the land.

Afar off, above the hollow where the Evans spread was located, dust hung in a thin, shimmering cloud. Other dissipating streamers marked distant riders proceeding in two's and three's and clusters along the winding hill-country trails. All of them seemed to be heading toward the Evans' headquarters.

Hastily, Rance drifted his own horse into cover, moved ahead more cautiously. By the time he'd reached a vantage point where he could see into the hollow, another hour had passed.

It was worth the time and effort. Spread out below him, milling and churning, were more horses and riders than he'd ever seen gathered together at one time in the valley. Nor was even that the end of it, for others kept dribbling in while he watched—gaunt, hard men on crow-bait horses, riding down out of the surrounding hills.

Quietly, Rance dropped back out of view once more; considered.

Last night, the three Evans boys had died. Today, their brethren of the sticky-rope hill-country outfits were gathering to take vengeance. The hospitality they'd offer a Las Crescentes rider—let alone one of the owners—would likely be a trifle on the rugged side.

But it was Las Crescentes' opportunity, too—one that appealed to him in his present reckless mood.

This gathering was too big, two well-timed and organized, ever to be spontaneous. There was a leader behind it, the same leader who was ramrodding this whole widespread fence-cutters' war.

More important, odds were that the leader would be present today, down there at Evans's.

Rance pulled his Stetson low, prayed silently that short memories and the spread of the hill country would let him pass unrecognized. Then, boldly, he back-tracked to the nearest in-bound trail, rode it straight towards the Evans home ranch.

APPARENTLY his outfit fitted. He drew no more than passing glances from the others. Once he reached the clump of shanties, still undiscovered, he dismounted in the shadow of a shed, made a pretense of fussing over an imaginary thorn in his horse's foot while he looked the situation over.

It wasn't reassuring.

One man said: "We'll fix the rats! We'll slice their fence into bucket-bails, an' we'll burn their damn' ranch down around their ears."

His companions nodded.

"The Holcums have been too damn' long in this valley. Tonight we'll wipe 'em out."

They drifted on. Rance felt a tiny rill of sweat trickle down his spine.

Only he still hadn't turned up the leader, and that was what he'd come for.

Cautiously, he straightened, started to turn.

Behind him, a hoarse, startled voice rang out, echoing over the tumult of the hollow.

"By God, it's Rance Holcum! *Get him!*"

Rance ducked just as someone fired. The slug tore off his hat, hammered into the side of the shed by which he stood. His horse spooked at the same instant, racing headlong away across the hollow, leaving him stranded and afoot.

For the fraction of a second Rance stood frozen, then whirled, dived through the shed's doorway amid a hail of whistling lead.

The firing cut off. Hastily, he scrambled upright, clawed his own gun clear. When someone thirty yards away moved across the field of fire presented by the half-open door, he slammed off three fast shots, had the satisfaction of hearing the other howl.

The voices outside the shed climbed to an angry babble, but no one else infringed on the doorway. Rance dropped down, waited for the hillmen's next move. Bad as his situation was, he at least had the shelter of the shed. The rough lumber of its walls wouldn't stop a bullet, and there were cracks ranging up to half an inch between many of the boards, with late sunlight streaming through, but he couldn't be seen, and the dirt floor enabled him to get so low as to be out of the way of most bullets.

Outside, the babble cut off.

"Holcum!" someone bellowed.

"I hear you."

"Come on out while you've got the chance, or we'll shoot that damn' shack to pieces."

"Come in and get me!"

No answer. Rance grinned sourly. Maybe somebody would decide they had a wolf by the tail after all.

The voice again: "Last chance, Holcum."

"I'm still waiting."

Abruptly, a hail of lead slashed through the shed. Rance hugged the dirt floor.

As suddenly as it had started, the shooting stopped, with Rance still in one piece. A sort of uneasy silence settled over the dusty little building.

THEN part of the tracery of sunlight seeping through the cracks and bullet holes on the side away from the door was cut off. Rance caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure creeping close, peering through a knothole.

He grimaced, fired just to one side of the spot where the other stood. It was a fool's trick, he knew, but he just didn't have it in him to gun the man down in completely cold blood.

The intruder bellowed panic, fled.

More silence. Rance found himself tensing. Inactivity now was almost worse than bullets. He thought back to that afternoon in the gully just off the Box Y range. How he'd surged out, running low, and how the gunner above him had risen to get a clear shot with the Winchester. Only he, Rance Holcum, had fired first, and the sniper had gone to join his dead chief Charlie. The trio's other member, the one Rance had wounded at the line shack, had disappeared without further ado.

Rance grinned a little at the speed with which the would-be killer had departed. Later, he'd caught one of the dead men's horses, pushed off himself for Las Crescentes . . . partly because of Kathie, and Judge Vreeland's letter . . . partly out of anger and the three assassins . . . and partly because he was old King Holcum's son, and the ties of blood were strong in spite of everything. Mixed-up reasons, hard to put into words. Suddenly he'd been tormented by a growing hunger to see the people who once had been his, and this valley hemmed by the three great crescent peaks.

He sobered. Wondered again whose

hate had sent those killers forth to hunt him.

And now he was here, back in the hills that fringed the valley, pinned in a flimsy shack by another gun-slung crew panting to nail his hide to the wall. There wasn't any way out, and they'd show no mercy. . . .

Another fusillade cut off his reverie. Bullets sieved the shack.

And then, abruptly, other more distant shots echoed. A thunder of hoofs, a burst of shouting.

Rance brought his face up out of the dirt in time to see a scythe of whooping, shooting riders sweep over the hollow's rim, down past the open door. Confusion, noisy panic, exploded around the shack. He heard Kilgore, the big Triple Crescent foreman, roaring orders.

Rance's heart pounded. It was too good. It couldn't be true.

But it was. There could be no mistaking that bellow. His besiegers were back-tracking.

"Rance!" Kilgore roared. "Rance Holcum!"

"Kilgore!" Rance showed himself, swept up an arm in greeting.

The big man swung from his horse, lumbered heavily forward. His beefy face was red, wreathed in a monstrous grin. A dozen riders followed in his wake.

"My God, boy! We heard that shootin' as we came in. I gave you up for a gone goose right." He gripped Rance's shoulder. "What kind of a fightin' damn' fool are you, takin' on this mob alone?"

RANCE started to answer, then stopped. All at once his lips seemed stiff, his mouth dry.

The riders were pressing close about him—and they were riders he'd seen before, riders who'd been gathered here in this hollow when he came. Outside of Kilgore, he didn't recognize a single Triple Crescent face.

He snatched for his gun.

Hands shot out, caught him, gripped his arms vise-like. He didn't even clear leather.

He said tightly: "What's the play, Kilgore?"

"The play?" The giant foreman's grin stayed put, only now it held neither friendliness nor mirth. "Hell, Rance, you oughta be able to figger that out yourself." A gesture. "These here's my boys. I'm ramroddin' 'em. The Crescent's done, so we're gettin' ours while we got the chance."

"It's a good chance," Rance nodded. He matched Kilgore's grin with one of his own. "What better chance could any yellow-bellied thief ask than to ramrod Las Crescentes in a war where he's bossing the other side, too?"

Kilgore's maul-fist came up. The restraining hands wouldn't let Rance dodge. He hung in a swirling scarlet haze of pain. Then that, too, passed, and at last he could see again.

"Well, Kilgore?" He made his puffed lips grin again. "What comes next? Or am I a damned fool even to wonder, when the skunk who's got me has already proved he's low enough to double-cross the outfit he's paid to ramrod?"

The big foreman was breathing hard. His beefy face kept growing darker.

"You're the sharp one, Rance. You should know. I'm gonna hold you for a hostage, till I'm sure I got all bets covered. After that"—his voice grew thicker—"after that you fill a grave."

Rance held his gaze steady, his voice level.

"Kill me, Kilgore, and sooner or later the word will get out. Thad will howl. You'll end up with the law on your tail."

"I will?" It was as if some hidden

spring within the big foreman had been released. He roared with laughter. "What a damn' simple-minded jackass you turned out to be! For a minute there you almost had me with all that talk about a double-cross. Only Thad ain't gonna howl to nobody when he hears you're dead. He figgers you're just another wolf to split the spread with, an' too damn' friendly with his wife to boot. An' if it's proof you want —why, how th' hell you suppose I knew you was out here? Why you think I came?"

Rance stood stock still, silent.

Again Kilgore roared. "I'll tell you why! I came because Thad sent me. Talk about your double-crosses! Mister, your damn' brother turned you in!"

CHAPTER VI

Woman's Way

SLOWLY, Kathleen Bren Holcum picked up her Bible, let it fall open to where the telegram lay.

The telegram. Three long years old, now. A slip of folded paper already beginning to yellow. Heartbreak in black and white.

Kathie pressed her lips tight shut, opened her eyes very wide against the clouding mist. But the tears came anyhow, flooding now, and her fingers trembled till she could hardly hold the rattling paper.

"Leaving Las Crescentes for good. You better find someone else."

Shaded Spencerian script. Not even his writing. Dismissal by wire, crude and curt.

Only . . .

Only Rance had come back today, to ask her what had happened, how she'd come to marry Thad, why she hadn't answered his letters.

Letters from Rance, her first love and her last. Letters she'd never received.

Dismissal by wire; unidentifiable—not even his writing.

Thad, waiting for her when the stage came in; anticipating . . .

Within her, something snapped. She cried out in her anguish, flung herself onto the bed, where she could scald the pillow with her tears, muffle the sound of her sobbing.

Then that, too, passed. She lay still, silent, staring off into space, trying to think and failing. All weariness, at last she sat up and gazed dully at her own image in the mirror above the dresser.

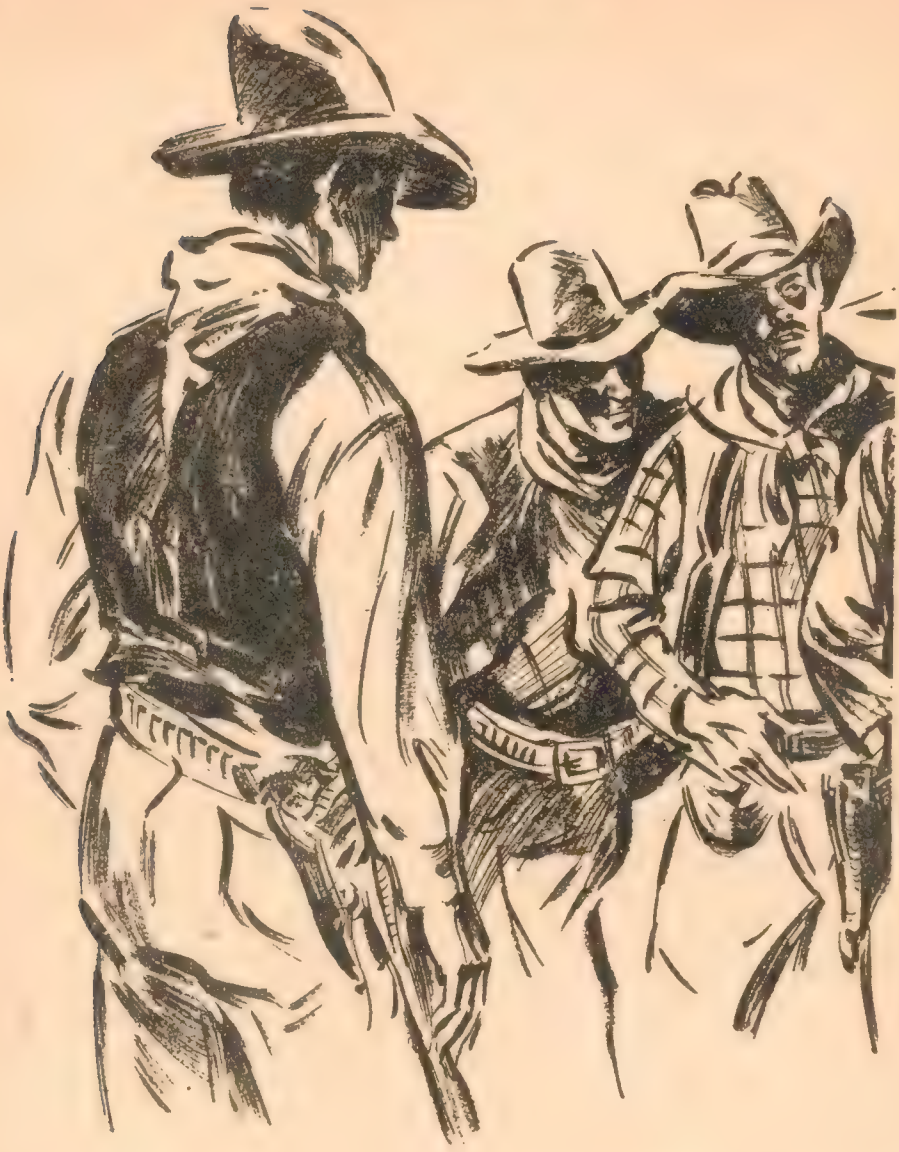
It shocked her to see herself so—eyes bloodshot, face puffy with weeping, hair straggling down in a rat's-nest of disorder. Automatically, she rose, set to work with comb and brush, and a rag soaked with cool water from the bowl on the washstand. The outward evidences of her pain began to fade.

But her mind would not leave the thing alone. Like a searching rider, it shuttled back and forth, over and over the ground—checking, considering, probing. It was separate, a thing apart from her, slipped free of control.

There'd been the telegram, and disillusion. Then Thad—kindly, solicitous, eager. Out of the depths of her own bitterness and resentment, she'd married him.

Now, she knew who had sent that telegram in Rance's name; who had kept his letters from her.

But knowing, what could she do about it? She had been tricked, but she was still Thad's wife. The fact that he had undoubtedly maneuvered the break between Rance and her did not alter her own acceptance of him as her husband in the eyes of God and man. Her upbringing, her beliefs, her whole character—they would permit no other



course.

Thad. Her husband. The weakling whom circumstance had dealt a task too big. She'd never really loved him, nor even respected him, so she had come to know him as he was, her picture unshadowed by sentiment. The discovery that he had won her by fraud, once it came into focus, did not surprise her particularly: it fitted too well into the pattern of his character as she knew it. So much so that even in the first shock of enlightenment she'd managed to hide the things she felt. In her role as Thad's wife she'd forced herself to drive Rance out again without letting him know what his brother had done to him and to her—what a terrible crime he'd done.

Again the tears overflowed. She had

They faced each other coldly, their hands hovering sensitively over their guns.

barely repaired the damage when Thad came.

SHE knew he had been drinking before he reached the door. It showed in the way he rode in, hell-for-leather, in the face of the crawling fears that in him extended even unto horseflesh. He almost fell from the saddle in dismounting, and the voice with which he cursed the lathered horse was thick with liquor.

In spite of it, she faced him. She said: "Thad, there's something I want to talk to you about."

She'd expected him to cringe a little at that, in spite of the drink. She knew just as he was afraid of everything within his world that was not wholly passive, he was afraid of her, at least a trifle.

Instead, he bulled brazenly by her, sneering, and she saw he had a bottle in his coat pocket.

"I want to talk, Thad," she repeated.

"Oh, y'do, do yuh?" His lip curled, and he drank from the bottle. When he lowered it, there was a sadistic viciousness in his face she'd never seen before. "Well, I wanna see you, too, so tha' makes't even."

Kathie stood very still. "You're drunk."

"Drunk?" He snarled his defiance. "Hell, yes, I'm drunk. So what? Wha' y'got t'say?" He lurched toward her, drew back his half-clenched fist. "Y' damn' cat! Say somethin'! Tell me y' didn' have tha' polecat Rance in here cattin' th' minute my back was turned! I dare yuh!"

"You—!" In spite of Kathie's resolutions, the word summed up a world of loathing. "You dare to stand there—"

"He was here, wasn' he?"

Kathie swayed a little. A sort of sickness gripped her.

She said: "Yes, Rance was here. You can think what you please. I don't care, now." And then, pulling the yellowed slip of paper from her pocket: "Here's your telegram, Thad."

While she watched, his eyes went wide to the whites, then narrowed. His mouth twisted. He swaggered, like a child trying to brazen out his guilt.

"So y'know. So what? Wha' diff'r-'nce 'sit make?" He rocked with drunken mirth. "Got caught, din' yuh? Wasn' so smart after all." A snort. "Don' matter. Never did me no good."

Wordless, she let him rant.

"Rance. Always Rance. Th' ol' man saw it, even." He snorted again. "Tha' was it, wasn' it? Never could get your mind off Rance."

She said, very low and distinct: "I hate you, Thad Holcum!"

"Dear ol' Rance. . . . Me, I loved you so much it hurt, so much I even sent you tha' fake telegram. Thought I had yuh, too. Married yuh, didn' I? On'y I was wrong. Y'played it like y'meant it, on'y alla time y'were thinkin' 'bout Rance. Think I didn' see it? Y' jus' kep' waitin' . . . waitin'. . . . An' now he's back, an' th' firs' afternoon he comes here—"

Abruptly, he broke off, stumbled across and slumped into a chair, eyes deep-set and brooding. Then, slowly, he began to laugh. Louder and louder and louder, till the whole room echoed with the sound.

"Rance!" he roared. "Rance, my egg-suckin' brother! I sent him off t' case th' Evans place, an' then I bragged it up in town where Yancey's boys c'd hear me. By sundown th' dirty son'll be dead an' buried!"

FOR WHAT SEEMED an eternity, Kathie stood unmoving, marveling at her own control.

She marveled, too, at her own stupidity and lack of insight. Because Thad was so notably weak, she'd taken it for granted he was weak only. She'd missed the undercurrent of viciousness, the murderous, scheming savagery his lack of backbone veiled. Now, as it all came clear, and without any conscious reasoning process, she saw him as he really was; accepted him; knew what she had to do.

Quietly, she turned, moved toward the door.

His snarl stopped her short.

"Where y'think y're goin'?"

"I still have work to do, Thad."

"Work?" He guffawed. "Th' hell y'say! Think I don' know yuh? Think y'can sneak out an' save yer Rance's hide, don' yuh? On'y it ain' gonna work. Not while I'm here, it ain'—"

She knew her face was stiff. She felt a little tremor of panic that he should

read her thoughts so easily.

"I'm not going, because there's no need to go," she said levelly. "You lied about Rance. You don't have the nerve to send anyone to kill him. If you weren't drunk you wouldn't even dare talk about it. You're too afraid of Rance ever to try to harm him." Swiftly, she stepped toward him, hand extended. "Give me that bottle! I won't have you drinking this way!"

He jerked it away instead, just as she'd known he would. Sucked at it greedily, like a hog rooting in a trough.

She pressed closer, clutched for it.

"Give it to me!"

"T'hell wi' yuh!" He cuffed at her face, sent her reeling away.

She ignored the stinging pain.

"I want that bottle, Thad!"

"Well, y'ain' gonna get it." His voice was an alcohol-fumed mumble, barely coherent. He drank again in spite of it. Then, when she started to approach once more, lurched up from his seat, glaring belligerence. "G'wan! Get into y'r room! Take some time t' think about Rance—"

She watched him almost unbelievingly, hardly able to conceive how he could stand after all the liquor she'd baited down his throat with her badgering.

He managed a threatening, unsteady step toward her.

With simulated meekness she turned, crossed the hall, entered the bedroom. Thad was slumping back again, dull-eyed, into his chair.

She closed the door.

ONE MINUTE. TWO. Three.

Carefully, Kathie turned the knob, reopened the door a crack.

Thad sprawled limp in his seat, doubled over the table, head resting on arm. His breathing came steady, heavy.

Swift, silent, she slipped from the bedroom, crossed to the outside door on tiptoe. Heart pounding, she closed it behind her, ran across the big, barren yard to the bunkhouse.

It was empty.

New panic seized her. She spun, searched for some means of escape.

The horse Thad had ridden stood in the shade of the yard's lone tree, a massive Arizona sycamore. Kathie breathed a brief, thankful prayer.

But before she could move the house door opened. Thad stumbled out, scowling against the late sun. He still clutched his bottle.

Their eyes met. Thad's lips twisted in a snarl. He lunged toward her, cutting her off from the horse.

"I'll break your neck—"

Kathie fled from the bunkhouse. She ran far out, circling, on the chance Thad would follow, give her another chance for the horse.

Instead, a sudden mad light gleamed in his red-rimmed eyes. Half falling, he whirled, clawed for the horse's reins. Almost before Kathie realized what he was doing, he was in the saddle, spurring the animal toward her.

For the first time she felt real fear. She ran faster . . . faster. . . .

A tattoo of hoofs. A hurtling form.

She flung herself sideways, away. Felt the rush of wind as horse and rider shot past, glimpsed her husband's rage-contorted face. It was like some awful mask—hideous, hardly human. The reins snaked out in a whiplash, seared her neck.

She ran again, sobbing now, breath coming in anguished gasps. It dawned on her starkly: *He means it! He's trying to ride me down!*

Again the hoofs thundered. Desperately, she leaped away. A lashing, booted foot turned left breast and side to fiery torment. She fell. Tried to rise,

only to trip over her own torn petticoat. Clawing at it, she rolled aside barely in time to escape another charge.

Dust filled her nostrils. Dirt choked her. The petticoat came loose. She dragged it from about her feet in a spasm of effort. Her dress was torn, too, her shoulders bared.

She was too weak to run now. Enveloped in a haze of agony, she didn't even try. There wasn't any use. That she understood, quite certainly. Because he was toying with her, killing her by inches. Drunk as he was, he couldn't have missed her all these times by chance.

Dully, she watched him come again, a madman riding a white-eyed, foam-flecked horse. Great iron-shod hoofs flicked past her head. The boot gashed her cheek. The reins flayed flesh from her bare shoulders. . . .

She screamed, leaped involuntarily with the pain. The petticoat—still hanging limp in her hands—tripped her again. She fell back.

The petticoat. Yards of white cotton. A banner in her hands.

A chance.

Horse and rider hurtled toward her.

SOBBING, praying, she sucked in the last ounces of her strength, stumbled upright. With all her might she flicked the ballooning petticoat straight for the horse's eyes.

The animal screamed, reared back high and wide, rolling left away from the cloth.

Thad shot from the saddle as from a sling, landed flat on his back so hard Kathie could hear him strike the ground. He didn't move.

A spasm of trembling struck Kathie. She shook harder and harder, till she couldn't stand. In spite of herself she began to cry.

A dozen yards away, Thad moaned.

Kathie stopped short, rose. New panic glowed amid the embers of the old. Slowly, painfully, she walked toward where the horse now stood, wary-eyed and edgy. But at last she got the reins, climbed into the saddle.

Once more, her husband moaned.

It was as if she hadn't heard him; as if he were dead. She thought of him as she would have a crippled rattler.

But Rance was up in the hills by the Evans ranch. Probably he was dead already, if what Thad had said were true. . . .

But there was still a chance—

Desperately, she quirted the weary horse toward town.

CHAPTER VII

The Wire Cutters

THE world looked very bright to Kilgore as he rode out of the hollow that sheltered the Evans ranch. Six months ago, as Las Crescentes ramrod, he'd been nothing but a glorified hired hand—bullied by The King, patronized by Thad, sullen and discontented with his lot. Today, thanks to what he chose to call ambition, plus a wide acquaintance among the sticky-rope hill-country outfits and a little judicious treachery, he stood close to being The King's successor.

It was a pleasant thought, one to make him grin as he jogged along at the head of his ragged column of nearly half a hundred warriors. As things stood now, he had only to carry out his part of the bargain that had started him in this wire-cutter's war, and he'd ride out of the valley a wealthy man.

But supposing he didn't carry out his part? Or rather, supposing he carried out his part, and then a little more?

The King of Las Crescentes. Absolute ruler of this whole great valley.

Old King Holcum had started from scratch and made it stick. Why couldn't he? The hillmen would back him if he took the lead.

He savored the possibilities as he rode: an empire that stretched as far as the eye could see. The power to make and break men at will. Swapping the bunkhouse for a mansion. Liquor, a thousand times more than he could ever drink. A Chinese cook. The mint to gamble with. And women—there was a greaser wench with ripe red lips and eyes that mocked and a body straight out of hell. As boss of the valley, he'd take her away from her man, and God help whoever tried to say him nay.

Only first he'd have to double-cross Yancey.

Yancey. Boss of Vic Dorgan's Double D, ramrod for God only knew how many imported gunmen, originator of this whole wire-cutters' war.

Killer.

A little lump of ice seemed to form in Kilgore's stomach. It would not go away.

Yes, he'd consider. . . .

They came to the spot where the trail forked. One spur ran left to the Las Crescentes line. The other went right to Magruder's Cracker Box.

Kilgore twisted in his saddle.

"Stick with it, boys. I got to ride up an' augur with Magruder."

They laughed, and he laughed with them. Everybody had a pretty good idea who'd be waiting for him at the Cracker Box, and they damn' well knew it wasn't Magruder. But no one could say he'd told them. Yancey had made him promise that the Double D's name would never be mentioned. Kilgore had been careful to keep that promise.

The icy knot in his stomach grew larger. Maybe, if the sign was right. . . .

The Double D foreman met him at the Cracker Box's door, saturnine face savage, hand on gun.

"Howdy, Yancey—" Kilgore began cautiously.

Yancey said: "Who killed Magruder?"

"Magruder?" Kilgore gawked, fumbled. "What the hell you takin' about?"

Yancey jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Kilgore lumbered past him, stared down at the body.

"I swear, Yancey, I got no idea—"

"What about the Evans boys? Who got them?"

"Dunno, Yancey. We just found 'em there, all shot to doll rags, with Will burned bad as if the Apaches had got at him." Kilgore grunted. "Hell, what's it matter? The bunch of 'em's dead. We got work enough to do."

It was Yancey's turn to grunt. The green eyes were cold and hard as polished Mexican jade.

"I don't like it, that's what it matters. Somebody's taking cards in this game without showing the color of their money. I want to know who's playing, and what it is they've got up their sleeves."

IT WAS an interesting moment for Kilgore. For the first time he was seeing Yancey the omnipotent in the throes of some emotion close akin to fear. Further, out of the background of his own brute strength, he interpreted such disturbance instantly as a sign of weakness. It heartened him. He hitched up his gun-belt, began to wonder if he might not be able to carry through his visioned play here and now.

He said: "Maybe Rance Holcum's your man, Yancey. I got him under guard back at the Evans place, but he could've done for Magruder an' the Evans's before I got him."

"*Rance* Holcum?" Yancey's face was

a study in shock. "You're crazy! He's dead—"

"Uh-uh. I know him. It's Rance, all right."

"Where'd he come from? What's he up to?"

"Dunno. The boys caught him snoopin' 'round before I got there. No need to worry, though. He's on ice now." Kilgore hesitated. "What you want done with him, Yancey?"

"You need to ask, when you know the law rates him for a third of the Triple Crescent, now the old man's dead?"

"I reckoned maybe you'd hold him for a hostage in case there was any trouble—"

"What the hell do I want with hostages at this stage of the game? Just see that he ends up buried."

Again Kilgore caught the note of worry, uncertainty. It goaded him to action. Belligerently, he swaggered.

"Be damned if I see why I get saddled with all the dirty work around here."

Instantly, Yancey's temper matched his own.

"Maybe I better remind you, then: you're getting paid for it. Or isn't that enough reason?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Kilgore hooked his thumbs very near his guns. "Maybe I changed my mind. Maybe I decided you ain't as tough as you make out to be."

"So?"

"Then I could take you, an' grab off the whole damn' valley for me."

"Maybe. Or maybe you could get your thick head shot off." Never had Yancey's green eyes gleamed more bleakly. He stepped back a pace. "Look around you, crock-head; look around you."

Kilgore stood rigid. He couldn't seem to think fast enough. He didn't know whether to make his play or do as told. The lump of ice was back in his stomach.

A new voice said: "Go ahead, draw. Yuhr brains'll be on th' wall before yuh clear leather."

A voice—and yet Kilgore had been sure he and Yancey were alone.

Sweat stood out on his forehead. Slowly, he pivoted towards the speaker.

Across the room, a side door stood inches ajar. Now, while he watched, it swung open, framing one of Yancey's hard-case gunmen. The trigger-man's Colt was out, the hammer hanging ready to fall beneath his thumb.

A CHILL rippled through the Las Crescentes foreman's massive frame. With infinite care he moved his hands away from his own guns.

Yancey laughed once—harsh, clipped.

"By God, Kilgore! You just saved your own fool life!"

As noiselessly as it had opened, the door closed—almost—again.

Yancey said: "Remember this, Kilgore. I copper my bets. Always. Your second try is your last."

"Sure, Yancey. Sure." Kilgore licked his lips.

"You know your job. Take those hillbilly saddle tramps and rip up the Triple Crescent, end to end. Every building, every yard of fence. Drive off the stock, whatever you can gather up in a hurry. This war won't look real if you don't. Then get back to Evans's and finish Holcum; I'm holding you responsible to see that that job's done and done right. And after that"—the lips below the drooping blond mustache parted in a mirthless grin—"get out of this valley and the Territory as fast as you can ride. We're back in the brush, but we're not far enough back so there won't be law in here as soon as the word gets out."

"Sure, Yancey."

"Don't get any more ideas, either, Kilgore. You haven't got the brains to handle 'em. Gunning me down won't do you any good. This wire-cutters' war is the thing that's going to push Las Crescentes to the wall. When the fighting's over and the law gets here, they'll ask who ramrodded the cutters. Sooner or later, one of your hillbillies will talk. You'll be the goat, whether I'm dead or not. If you've taken your split and gone, I'll pass the word around that you were killed. If you're still here, the law hangs you. But either way, nothing happens to me, because all I'm ever going to be is the honest cattleman that buys up what's left of the Triple Crescent and makes it pay. Got that straight?"

Kilgore nodded. He didn't dare trust himself to speak.

"Then get moving."

Shaking with impotent fury, Kilgore obeyed. He had no choice. As Yancey had said, whatever happened he, Kilgore, would be the goat.

Now that the way had been pointed, he could see even farther. Yancey would buy up Las Crescentes—range and brand together, at give-away prices. Then those hard-case Double D gunhands Yancey had imported would comb the hills till they'd gathered up every head of Las Crescentes beef the wire-cutter raids had taken, plus the sticky-rope outfits' own stock. "Travel or die" would be the hillmen's slogan.

The valley would crown Jud Yancey new King of Las Crescentes.

And he, Kilgore, had no choice but to run for it—providing Yancey didn't have him killed first. Likely when it was over he wouldn't even get his promised cut for organizing the war.

Sickness welled up to mingle with his fury. He'd stepped out of his class when he tried to buck Yancey. He knew that now. He should have stuck to ramrodding straight, like he had for old King Holcum; that was his speed.

HE CAME back to the fork in the trail again, to the spot where his two-score warriors waited. He could see from their faces that his own dark thoughts showed.

He snarled, "Get up an' ride!" then bulled on ahead before they could ask questions, hating himself and them and Jud Yancey all equally.

Within an hour they were within sight of their goal. Before them, like toothpicks in a sandbox, posts marked the Las Crescentes line, half obscured by a straggling stand of cedars bushing out on both sides of the fence.

Kilgore halted, waited for the others to come up with him. He made his orders curt.

"Three of you ride each way along the wire. Cut as you go, between every post. The rest of us'll push on through an' burn the ranch, then start roundin' up the herds."

Silence. Eyes dodged his.

"Well, what you waitin' for? Get goin'!"

An old-timer by the name of Howie Flake spoke.

"We-uns thought mebbe yuh'd set us straight on what happened, Kilgore."

"What the hell you talkin' about?"

"Yuh rode up t' Magruder's lookin' like a million dollars, Kilgore. Yuh came back with yuhr tail betwixt yuhr legs. Somethin' went wrong. We want to know what 'twas 'fore we go ahead."

Heads nodded, but the eyes still dodged.

Rage came to Kilgore. Suddenly he saw these men as The King had always seen them: coyotes, skulking in the hills, glad to feast on a fallen beef, but afraid to come out till it was down.

He put his bitterness into words.

"Who the hell you think you are to ask questions, Flake? I'm givin' the orders 'round here!"

"Now take it easy, Kilgore—"

"Easy, hell! Get movin'!" Kilgore whipped up his own gun, slashed savagely. The muzzle raked Howie Flake's forehead, spilled him out of his saddle with blood coursing from an ugly gash in his scalp.

No one spoke.

"Get movin'!" Kilgore roared.

They moved.

Kilgore felt only ugliness. There wasn't any triumph in downing an old man like Flake. Twenty years ago, yes. Not now. Especially not when he, Kilgore, knew it was just one more piece of Yancey's dirty work dished up for him to do.

Slowly, they rode on down to the fence. Sullen hillmen swung from their saddles, broke out their wire cutters.

Then, out of the shelter of a clump of cedars across the line, a horseman appeared on a great black stallion. He rode towards the knot of wire cutters at a pace neither fast nor slow, reined up directly opposite Kilgore, gun already drawn.

Recognition.

"First man uses those pliers dies where he stands!" the rider said coldly.

Kilgore hardly heard him. He knew, of a sudden, that his cards were all played out. His own voice rang strange in his ears.

"Cole Holcum!"

CHAPTER VIII

Cole Cashes In

THE men with the wire cutters stopped abruptly, and Cole could see big Kilgore rock. It gave him a queer inner satisfaction, a sense of power, the way men's terror always did.

He said: "You're through, Kilgore. You've cut your last wire."

"Take him, Kilgore!" muttered a man off to one side. "Take the dirty—"

Cole fired once. The man pitched to the ground.

Silence. Stricken silence, drawn taut as a Comanche's bowstring.

"For the rest of you damn' fools," Cole said, "go home while you've got the chance, and be thankful I don't come up and burn you out for having the gall to think you could cross a Triple Crescent line."

The riders moved nervously. Someone's horse pawed the ground.

"You heard me! Go home!" Cole let the fury into his voice. His eyes sought out theirs, challenged the hillmen one by one.

One by one, they rode away.

Only Kilgore was left, then. He sat his horse solidly—almost stolidly—facing Cole. He made no move to leave.

"Well?"

The big Triple Crescent foreman's beefy face worked. His voice was suddenly hoarse.

"Don't hooraw me, Cole. I know you. You'd shoot me in the back before I went a yard."

Kilgore. A big, rough, stupid man who'd taken cards in a game too fast for him. Too stubborn to run, too slow to win.

"Right," Cole agreed icily. He could see the other drawing himself together, trying to work himself up to a killing rage.

"You can't get away with it, Cole. You're on the dodge already—"

"I'll chance that, Kilgore. One more corpse won't bother me." Cole sneered. "Will Evans talked before I finished him, and so did Magruder. I can put two and two together. You're worse than a cow-thief. You're drawing Las

Crescentes pay while you sit in on Jud Yancey's game. Only you've lost, damn you! Make your play!"

Rage came at last to Kilgore—rage born of desperation. In a spasm of fury he clawed for his Colt.

Coolly, Cole fired. . . .

Cole almost whistled as he rode along. So far, no slips. Kilgore was dead. The Evans boys were dead. Magruder was dead. The crowd with the long ropes knew he was back, had seen him strike. That was why he'd worked it as he had: to fill them with the fear of God and Cole Holcum, make them hunt their holes and stay there.

There was the other angle, too. The Jud Yancey angle.

This war was Yancey's. That meant this drive today was part of his plan. Its failure, the rout of the fence cutters, would throw off Yancey's schedule, put Yancey himself on the defensive.

Cole grinned his chill wolf grin. Yancey would be one hell of a lot more on the defensive before this night was over, providing his own plans worked out. It all depended on Vic Dorgan.

For basically, Dorgan was the keystone to the whole structure of Yancey's scheme. The job as Double D ramrod gave Yancey a tenuous toe hold on legitimacy to help veil his crookedness.

But young Vic was strictly a weak sister, a dumb kid. Probably he felt a long ways from enthusiastic about his foreman's game. If he could just be scared into firing Yancey right now. . . .

Still grinning, Cole quirted the black. The Double D was the full length of the Las Crescentes holdings away, almost to the other end of the valley. With the sun already setting, it would take him the better part of a night's ride to reach the place.

But by midnight, riding hard, he'd crossed the Double D line. Two hours later he reined up, surveyed the distant Dorgan home ranch.

No lights showed in bunkhouse or headquarters. The howl of the coyotes, night wind rustling, were the only sounds.

In silence Cole pressed forward avoiding the bunkhouse, the corral. Warily, he tried the door of the hacienda itself. When he found it unlocked, he slipped swiftly inside, barred it behind him.

Bedsprings creaked. A sleep-sodden voice mumbled incoherencies.

GUN out now, Cole checked the building, room by room. He found it empty save for the one snoring figure. Cautiously, he returned to the man, struck a match.

Young Vic Dorgan sprawled on a bed in an alcove half a dozen steps away. His face hung slack in sleep, but he twisted restlessly, as if his dreams were bad.

Cole eyed him a moment, replaced his Colt in its holster. Then, carefully, he lighted a lamp.

The glass chimney clinked against the base. A tremor ran through young Dorgan. His eyes flashed open.

Cole let him see the wolf grin, loaded his voice with menace.

"Howdy, Dorgan."

The youngster on the bed lay very still, but the hands that clutched the blanket knotted so tight that the knuckles stood out white as ivory.

"Cole Holcum's the name, in case you disremember. I left the valley quite a while back. Now I've come home again, and I own a third of the Las Crescentes spread."

Still Dorgan didn't speak. His eyes showed white with terror.

"You think I'm going to let you and that yellow-bellied Yancey clean me out of my share?" Savagely, Cole

slapped the other across the face. "Me, Cole Holcum? Did you really think I'd let you get away with it?"

"For God's sake, Holcum—"

"Shut up!" Cole slapped him again. "You and that Yancey thought all you had to worry about was my paper-backed brother Thad, didn't you? You figured you'd slap him down, then take over—"

"No, no! It was all Yancey—"

"You think I'll believe that?" Cole snatched for Dorgan's throat.

Dorgan lunged wildly for the far side of the bed. Cole caught underwear instead of flesh. The other's struggles jerked him off balance. He tottered.

Sobbing aloud, Dorgan tore free, leaped past him in a mad dash for the door. By the time Cole could twist about, his adversary was clawing at the bar. He was screaming, too—shrill, fear-freighted hysteria. Then the bar came free. Young Vic started to lunge out into the night.

Cole cursed, snatched his gun up, fired. He saw Dorgan lurch under the slug's impact, knew the Double D's owner was dead before the man struck the ground.

But now the bunkhouse had come awake with a roar. There were voices, the ring of metal on metal, men stumbling awake.

Still cursing, Cole raced for the black, made the saddle just as someone opened up disconcertingly close with a Winchester. Grimly, he dug the spurs deep, hurtled off along his own back-trail.

It was a race after that. The whole Double D crew—that part which wasn't with Yancey—were hot on the trail in minutes. In a great arc they thundered across the valley's floor, like a net sieving a pond.

Bitterly, Cole pushed the black harder. The devil's luck he'd ridden ever since he came back to Las Crescentes at last had broken, left him to hang and rattle. He'd gone to the Double D to scare Vic Dorgan, not kill him. But Dorgan had scared too well, and there'd been no choice but to gun him down.

Now, Cole decided, was the time to hunt a hole—fast!

But the black was already tired, already lagging. It couldn't hold out much longer.

WORST of all, this was open valley country, rich grazing land. It offered no shelter whatsoever. Where in the hills he might have stood a chance to hide, even with the Double D crew close on his heels, here he could only rake his horse's flanks raw in a desperate effort to outrun the guns behind him.

Abruptly, he swung northwest towards Triple Crescent headquarters. There he could at least get another horse.

But the hoofs behind thundered closer. Already the peaks to the east showed ebon against the backdrop of the first grey hint of dawn.

The black reeled, tottered.

Snarling, Cole swung out of the saddle, wrenching his Winchester from its boot as he dropped. Then, savagely, he booted the animal in the rump, sent it lunging onward again.

The hoof-beats of his pursuers echoed louder. Vague forms appeared, racing out of the dying night as from a mist. Someone shouted as they sighted the movement of the distant stumbling black.

Cole dropped flat, waited till the nearest rider was mere yards away. Cold-nerved, he sighted, fired.

The rider spilled sidewise to the ground. Cole leaped up before he hit,

sprinted for the dead man's horse. He forked it before the other Double D men realized what had happened, levered a spray of shots to halt them as he sank in his spurs. In seconds he was back in the clear.

He laughed as he rode. The devil was still taking care of his own. Ahead lay the Las Crescentes line, a creek. There were high banks, a sprinkling of trees and brush. It gave him a choice. He could fight or hide or run for it, whichever seemed best, once he reached that creek.

A hill of sorts loomed, a swell in the valley's floor. The creek lay beyond. Cole drove his new mount up the slope at a full gallop. As if it were a signal, the first rays of the sun sprayed out across the valley as he topped the crest.

A shot rang out.

The horse Cole was riding pitched, fell. With a desperate effort he threw himself clear, but he still landed hard. It was seconds before he could shake the daze from his brain, stumble erect. He started forward. Then rocked back, rigid.

Jud Yancey and half a dozen Double D gunhands were ranged facing him on the downward slope between him and the creek.

Cole knew, then. He wouldn't live to collect, after all. He'd wasted his time and his bullets. The old man's empire would go to someone else.

To Yancey, maybe?

Yancey. Green-eyed killer, cougar-tough. Face like a saturnine devil-mask, yellow teeth bared below the tobacco-streaked blond mustache.

As in a dream, Magruder's words came back to Cole: *"He's bad, Cole. Plain poison. He's a gun-slingin' fool, a Texas killer. They say he backed Ben Thompson down once. . . ."*

The words faded. Coldly, Cole glanced about him.

The riders from the Double D bunkhouse had reined up to his rear around the foot of the knoll—watching, waiting. Jud Yancey and the others still held their line in front. On either side the two groups merged, hemming him in. There wouldn't be any escape this time.

A Double D puncher shouted: "Th' dirty son gunned down Vic Dorgan an' Harry Watt, Jud!"

"Dead?"

"Dead!"

"Saves you the trouble, eh, Yancey?" Cole said.

YANCEY didn't answer, but the green eyes seemed suddenly to sink deeper into their sockets.

It was coming now, coming fast. Cole could see it written across their leering faces, sculped in every line of stance. The tension, the hesitancy, went out of him. He found himself wanting to laugh.

Yancey shot a queer, oblique glance off to one side, then hunched forward in his saddle, face hate-twisted.

"All right—"

"To hell with that!" Cole grinned his chill wolf grin, and recklessness was cold fire in his veins. "They say you're a gun-slinging fool, Yancey. They say you backed Ben Thompson down."

"So?"

"So I may not get the Triple Crescent, but neither will you. I say you're yellow, you Texas rat! I say you're scared to fill your hand!"

It was good, that draw. Cole knew it was, from the moment his hand slapped leather. It would take the great-granddaddy of all the curly wolves west of the Pecos to beat it, night or day.

But before his Colt came clear, another gun was roaring. Not Yancey's, though; Yancey either wasn't trying,

or was slower than he by far. This gun was off to one side, out of view.

The slugs struck like sledges. Cole felt them lift him, smash him down. His own Colt fell. He could see the dust spurt where the bullets hit.

Then that same dust was in his mouth. It came to him, in vast surprise, that he was dying. Him, Cole Holcum—!

Jud Yancey's voice drifted to him across the years and miles: "Good work, there, boy! I always like to copper my bets when I'm mixing with gents like him."

Cole tried to laugh, but the blood choked him. At last the significance of Yancey's oblique glance came clear.

Gun bets, bushwhack-coppered.

Cole Holcum died.

CHAPTER IX

Showdown

BACK at the Evans home ranch the afternoon dragged drearily on. Not only was it hot, but Rance Holcum's guards—two ragged, stubble-faced, hill-country punchers—kept him lashed securely to a chair in spite of his protests. To while away the time, they amused themselves by discussing whether Kilgore would shoot Rance or hang him. There seemed absolutely no doubt in their minds that, one way or another, their prisoner would be executed.

But worse by far, for Rance, were his own dark thoughts—thoughts that plagued him, haunted him, would not let him be: *Thad betrayed me. For jealousy or money, or both, my own blood brother sent me out here to die.*

Bitterly, Rance caught himself wondering where Kathie fitted in.

Then the taller of the two guards got up, scowling, and began to pace the floor.

"Wisht we coulda gone with Kilgore an' th' boys. Ain't no fun playin' nursemaid t' this coyote."

"Poker?" The other hopefully displayed a worn and greasy deck of cards.

"No fun with two."

Together, they eyed Rance.

"We could cut loose his hands an' leave his feet tied," the shorter of the pair suggested. "He couldn't go very far with a chair hitched to his hind legs."

"How 'bout it, Holcum? Wanta play?"

Rance nodded dourly.

"Why not? Anything's better than this."

The guards laughed. Picking up Rance and the chair bodily, they carried him to the table, untied his wrists. They stayed careful, though, shifting their gunbelts so their Colts were beyond Rance's reach.

For Rance, it wasn't much of a game. He drew bad cards, and he played them worse. But it served to take his mind off Thad and Kathie and Kilgore, at least a little, and it gave him a chance to work circulation back into his hands. Though what good that last would do him, with his feet still bound to the legs of the chair, made only the sourest of conjecturing.

At the end of an hour, his meager cash had changed hands. He threw down his cards.

"That does me, boys."

"Sure 'nuff?" The tall puncher rose once more, scowled his disappointment. "That's a hell of a state!"

The distant thudding of hoofs came suddenly, echoing his words like an exclamation point. The guard stiffened. Hastily, he stepped to the door.

"Hey! They're comin' back!"

Rance's heart pounded. They were coming to kill him—while he sat here

helpless as a hog-tied calf.

"Shorty, tie that Holcum up!" the guard in the doorway clipped. "Kilgore'll skin us alive if he finds we let this *hombre* have his hands loose." And then: "Somethin's wrong. You can tell by the way they ride. I don't see Kilgore, neither—"

The short guard whipped up the tie-rope. He started to loop it around Rance's left wrist.

Rance sucked in air. He caught the hand that held the rope, jerked the guard toward him and off balance till he could snatch away the man's holstered Colt.

The guard yelled hoarsely, once. Then the barrel of his own gun slammed against his forehead. He went down, out.

The tall puncher in the doorway whirled, exploded into a draw.

Rance fired before the other's weapon cleared leather. The puncher pitched forward.

INSTANTLY, at the sound of the shot the tempo of the approaching hoofs picked up to dull thunder.

Twisting, Rance laid the revolver's barrel flat with the back of one of the chair-legs to which his feet were tied. He shoved the muzzle tight against the ropes, pulled the trigger.

The slug slashed through the cordage. A spasmodic kick broke the stray remaining fibers. One foot was free!

The ropes on his left foot went the same way.

A horse—one of the guard's, probably—stood outside. Staggering, feet numb, Rance stumbled through the doorway towards it.

The horse shied violently. Rance tripped over the needles the sudden rush of blood brought to his legs, sprawled headlong. Desperately, he tried to get up. He could hear the oncoming riders yelling now.

The horse cakewalked further away. Rance sprawled again.

It was hopeless, hopeless. He gave it up, dragged himself—half crawling—around the building, out of view.

A window yawned above him—a window back into the same room from which he'd come. Sweating, swearing, he clawed his way up to and through it, then lurched across the rough floor to a hiding-place behind the door.

Outside, an avalanche of steaming, sliding horseflesh swirled to a stop. Riders swung down, edged cautiously both ways around the shanty, guns drawn.

Gingerly, Rance tested his legs. They felt some better now. At least, he thought he could run without falling.

And outside were horses.

Shadow-like, he moved through the doorway, skirting the little knot of men still bent over the prone guard as he strode towards the nearest mount.

Someone yelled. A bullet whipped past him.

Rance vaulted into the saddle with a wild whoop. The other horses scattered as he dug in his spurs. He swept down upon them in a tight arc, reins swinging; sent them racing ahead of him. In spite of everything—Thad, Kathie, betrayal—jubilation sang in his veins. He was free, mounted, traveling; his erstwhile captors roaring their rage afoot.

He made for the hills.

Night found him still riding, with a back-trail behind him he felt satisfied no tracker could follow. Then, because he couldn't help wondering what devilment Kilgore and the hillmen had been up to in their absence, he cut back till he hit their trail outbound from the Evans ranch, rode it past the spur to Magruder's Cracker Box and on down toward the Las Crescentes line.

Fence posts loomed. His horse nickered, tossed its head, nostrils flaring.

Wary, gun out, Rance swung down, straining his eyes against the shadowy blackness of the clumps of cedar. But only the dim silence of the rangeland night rewarded him.

Cautiously, he stalked forward. He could see a gap in the fence now, wires hanging loose where they had been cut. Frowning, he quickened his pace.

Then his foot hooked into something too flabbily sodden for dirt or roots. He pitched forward, landed with one hand digging into the cold stickiness of blood-soaked cloth stretched over flesh.

Shuddering, he struck a match, looked down into Kilgore's loose, blank face. He remembered now—the unexpectedness of the riders' return; the tall puncher commenting on Kilgore's absence. And here lay Kilgore.

The match burned Rance's fingers. Hastily, he flicked it out, sat staring into the darkness.

AGAIN, as on that hot, taut, bullet-riddled afternoon in the gully between the Box Y and Bear Mountain pass, the doubts came to him: why give a damn about it all? Why worry about rustlers and cut fences and Las Crescentes? He wasn't wanted on this range, by Thad or anyone else. Bitterness, heartache, the prospect of a boot-hill grave—that's all coming back had brought him. The wolves were out to pave the valley floor with corpses. He'd have done better to keep on following the drifters' trail.

He thought of Kathie. He'd come back for her, more than anything else, and she'd ordered him out. He'd wanted to help, and she'd told him to ride.

His mouth twisted.

Off to the south a pinpoint of light flared. It died again, then leaped higher.

Fire. Flames, swirling and eddying, down there where the Triple Crescent ranch house lay.

Aloud, Rance said: "Kathie—!" Then, as quickly, he stopped short, cheeks suddenly hot. In a sort of frantic daze he fumbled the gun-belt from Kilgore's corpse, strapped it about his own waist to replace the half-emptied Colt he'd taken from his guard. He tied the holster down, and the weight felt good. A man could draw from a sling like that. . . .

His laugh rang bitter as he sat his saddle. Yes, the drifters' way was best, and he knew it . . . only he was still a double-damned fool.

The flames were dying embers by the time he reached the ranch house. Barns, bunkhouse, headquarters — all were gone. With an effort, Rance held himself steady, stalked through the ruins.

Wraith-like, the old scenes rose to haunt him—his first pony . . . the button-size saddle with the tapaderos and silver mountings The King had ordered for him from old *Tio Sam* Myres in El Paso . . . his mother, letting him scrape the cake bowl. . . .

Gone, all gone The dream of old King Holcum, crumbled into ashes.

Somewhere, someone moaned faintly.

Rance pivoted, searched the ruins. Finally located the limp form lying in the shadow of the seared Arizona sycamore.

It was Thad. He lay on his belly in a patch of grass stained dark with his own blood. Shaking, Rance lifted him, tried to turn him over. Even as he did it, he knew he should never have made the effort.

For an instant Thad's eyes opened. He stared up at Rance, made a horrible effort to speak. But blood rushed from his mouth before words came. He stiffened. His eyes rolled up.

He died.

Very slowly, Rance laid him back, closed the awful eyes. The anger, the hatred, he'd felt towards this man who'd been at once brother and betrayer fell away, and he found himself seeing Thad in true perspective for the first time: weakling amid strong, ruthless men; pygmy in a land of giants. He could almost feel pity. . . .

But there was still no sign of Kathie. New panic gripped him. He crossed and recrossed the yard, scoured every inch of ground.

He found nothing.

A few frightened horses, dregs of the raid, still wandered near the corral. Hastily, Rance roped one, threw on tack and bridle from the tired animal he'd been riding. It was easy to follow the raiders' trail, even in the night's semi-blackness. They'd made no effort to hide their sign.

As he rode, the pieces slowly fell into place.

He hadn't the slightest idea what the killers ahead planned, but they were heading straight for Dorgan's Double D. That meant the odds were on their being Yancey's men, the hired gunhands running wild. They'd been teamed with Kilgore, probably, letting him ramrod the fence cutters while Yancey prepared his own sweep.

Then had come trouble, shooting trouble, and Kilgore had gone down. The cause and killer didn't matter. Kilgore's death counted only in that it had scared out the wire cutters, sent them scurrying home.

Yancey's own wariors had filled the breach—maybe by their chief's command, maybe without. They could even be the ones who'd gunned down Kilgore. At any rate, they'd poured through the gap in the fence, driven across the range like a pack of ravening wolves. They'd killed Thad, burned out Las Crescentes.

They were the ones he, Rance Holcum, planned to face . . . for Kathie.

The miles pounded by beneath the horse's hoofs. Rance checked the occasional landmarks against his memory, realized that already he was nearing the creek that marked the Triple Crescent-Double D boundary.

OFF to the left, dawn was breaking over the eastern peaks. Then, suddenly, from the higher ground beyond the border ahead, shots echoed.

Rance raked his horse's flanks, raced for the creek. He didn't know what to expect, didn't care. In seconds his horse was splashing through the water, then up the opposite bank.

Before him were gathered the raiders, Yancey's gunhands, ranged in a circle around a little knoll.

Atop the knoll, a man lay dead.

A rider turned, glimpsed Rance.

"It's Holcum—the other Holcum!" He wheeled his horse, quirted towards Rance. The others folowed.

Rance waited. It was too late to run. Besides, he didn't feel like running. Not any more.

Yancey came up with the rest, eyes cold and hard and green as Mexican jade, face set in a saturnine devil-mask.

"Rance Holcum . . ." he rasped.

Rance held his voice flat and cold.

"That's my name."

"It is, is it?" Yancey sneered. "I've had me two Holcums before breakfast already today."

"Not Kathie—?" In spite of his efforts, Rance's voice went raw with panic.

"Kathie?" The devil-mask split below the streaking blond mustache. Yancey roared laughter. "Thad's wife, you mean? Hell, no! Jud Yancey don't count coup on Mexicans, nor Holcum women." Abruptly, the laughter died.

"I'm talking about your brothers, Holcum. That yellow-bellied Thad that crawled when he saw me coming, and Cole, who turned out not to be so damn' fast as he thought he was. He's lying back there on the hill."

Cole, too. Cole, who could tip a gun faster than any man Rance had ever seen.

"He had a big rep, that Cole. But he crawled before he died, just like Thad. . . ."

"You lie!" Rance grated.

"Like hell I lie! He crawled." Yancey seemed to savor the taste of the word. "Old King was a curly wolf. Too bad his whelps all turned out to be coyotes."

Old King Holcum, the curly wolf. The hellion who'd fought Indians and rustlers and outlaws to carve him an empire here in this valley of the three great crescent peaks. All his life, he'd fought—Yankees, carpetbaggers, Davis's black police, the bad ones here.

Yet now this ex-Tejano gun-shark dared to stand sneering.

"My luck runs in threes, Holcum. You finish the lot. I'm wiping out your whole damn' clan before breakfast, and you'll crawl like the rest of 'em. You'd have been smarter if you'd let Charlie and his boys finish you off back at the Box Y. . . ."

So the killer trio at the Box Y line shack had been Jud Yancey's men, after all. Thad and Cole were gone, and he, Rance, was going. He could see the gunhands smirk, waiting for the moment when he would crawl, as Yancey said Thad and Cole had done. Yancey's hand has hovering, ready to strike. In an instant death would come.

Only somehow, now, it didn't matter. Kathie didn't matter, either, nor Las Crescentes, nor his brothers sprawled dead in the dirt. Not while he still lived to prove Yancey the liar, to show these wolves that one, at least, of old King Holcum's sons knew how to die.

Then his eye caught the morning sun as it glinted from a gun-barrel rising, far off to one side. Of a sudden he knew the secret behind Jud Yancey's devil-mask—knew why old blue-lightning Cole had gone down in death. He'd fall to the roar of a dry-gulch gun, not Yancey slapping leather.

A great wrath rose within him. Only it was too late now. He couldn't take Yancey and that other one, too.

So he'd take Yancey.

He made his draw as the shot rang out.

CHAPTER X

Long Live the King!

JUDGE Vreeland shifted in his saddle, tried vainly to ease his aching bones.

"Damn it, Kathie, I'm too old for this by twenty years," he protested. "You should have gotten the marshal."

"And let Rance die?"

The judge shifted again, pulled his gaze away from the steady eyes' reproach.

"Now, Kathie—"

"You know why I came to you, Judge," she said. "The marshal is a long day's ride away. By the time he got here . . ." She broke off, and Ben Vreeland could see the pain-etched lines. "Everyone else—the ones who might have helped—belongs to Yancey, or else they're afraid of him. But I—I had to try."

In silence, they rode on. Futility, hopelessness, gnawed at the judge. He was an old fool ever to have let Kathie talk him into coming. He could do no good even if they found Rance—not at his age, with his slow draw and failing eyes.

The years rolled back. Back to the war and Carter's Legion, and trouble, and Reconstruction Texas. Back to those glorious, savage years of youth when he'd slashed his way by the grace of God and Mister Colt.

Him, Ben Vreeland, and young King Holcum. Two hellion kids, fighting and winning and carving an empire because they were too damned stubborn to know when they were licked.

Only young King Holcum was dead King now, and he was old Judge Vreeland, riding the ashes of The King's domain because of Rance and a girl's anguished plea.

Because Kathie wanted to avoid the ranch house and Thad and because it was a shorter, straighter route, they cut northeast across the Las Crescentes range towards the distant hills where the Evans place lay.

But it was a long road, made longer still by the judge's creaking joints. They'd started late, and night and darkness slowed them to a snail's pace.

It was towards morning when they first heard the raiders. The judge was the one who caught it. He was old, but he'd ridden this kind of trail in those bygone years, so he knew the things to watch for. In an instant he'd snatched the reins from Kathie's hands, pulled up both horses short and silent.

The sounds echoed closer: swift, drumming hoofbeats; laughter, swearing.

Then they saw the far-off flames leaping.

"The ranch—!" Kathie whispered.

"And the snakes who burned it." Judge Vreeland held himself steady. "They're coming this way. Heading for Vic Dorgan's Double D."

"Yancey . . . ?"

"Yancey. He's cut loose his wolf. He's taken the warpath."

"Then Rance—?"

"I'd be guessing, Kathie."

Taut, wordless, they waited. The riders sounded mere yards away now, their savagery a living thing. Seconds dragged to eternity. Vague shapes took form. They could hear Jud Yancey mouthing his triumph.

The judge drew his Colt, held it grimly ready.

AND then, swiftly as they had come, the shapes were passing, the voices and thud of hoofs fading away.

Judge Vreeland said: "We'll follow." He wheeled his horse about.

"But Rance—"

"If he isn't dead, they'll lead us to him. This is the big play. All other bets are off."

They rode, but not for far. Light was coming, danger too near.

Then other hoofbeats picked up behind him. Hastily, the judge dug in his spurs.

Still the rider behind them gained. The raiders were still ahead.

Before them, a creek wound and twisted through the valley, with higher ground rising beyond. The judge reined right through the shallows, Kathie close beside him. Together, they splattered past the first bend, out of view. It came to Judge Vreeland that he was breathing hard—harder than the girl, even. The years were taking their toll.

Shots rang out from the higher land to their left, on the far side of the creek.

Kathie's face went white. Wordless, the judge dismounted. Taking his ancient saddle gun from its boot, he climbed the bank, peered cautiously over the edge at the grim panorama spread before him.

Off to one side of a knoll that loomed a hundred yards beyond the creek, a man was holstering a forty-five. On the hillock, directly in front of Jud

Yancey and the other raiders, a second man lay prone in the dirt, still as only death could make him.

Jud Yancey was laughing.

A flurry of motion erupted beyond the creek-bend, along the raiders' back-trail. A horseman rode up over the rim. One of the raiders shouted, and the whole party wheeled, raced towards the rider.

The judge heard Kathie's voice in his ear, tight with anguish: "It's Rance—!" His heart sank.

The judge couldn't hear the things Rance and Yancey were saying, but he knew the signs. Every line, every motion, was a study in menace. Hands crept towards guns.

So that was how it would be: Rance against Yancey. Guns roaring, men dying. Showdown for old King Holcum's empire.

"Judge . . ." It was a sob, an entreaty.

Kathie rode furiously with the Judge right behind her, but the years were beginning to take their toll. He spurred at little harder

"No, Kathie. It's up to them."

Then he saw the gunman again, the man who'd been far off to this side holstering his Colt as they came up.

The man was still on this side. Only now he stood so far towards the creek as to be almost in back of Rance. He had his gun out once more.

Fury gripped Judge Vreeland—savage, seething anger. All his life he'd lived in hard country, among hard men; followed the grim, hard code of the Colts.

But that code didn't hold with murder.

In one quick movement he whipped up his old Winchester, drew his bead. Desperately, he prayed for a steady hand.

It was coming now. He could catch the harsh ring of the distant voices, see the raiders tense.

The gunman off to the side hunched forward.

Judge Vreeland squeezed his Winchester's trigger.

As if it were a signal, other guns roared. Rance's. Yancey's.

The gunman smashed from his saddle.

The judge began to shake. The carbine hung loose in his trembling fingers.

But now Yancey, too, was sagging, falling. He hit the ground hard. His body twisted, then lay still. Rance Holcum was bracing himself on his saddle horn. His Colt slipped from his fingers.

One of the raiders reached for a gun. Again Judge Vreeland fired. Fast, this time. By instinct.

The raider dropped. For an instant the others stared, blank bewilderment in their very stance. Their eyes searched the ground about them in a sort of panic, hunting for the hidden marksman. But they found nothing. As one man, they turned, galloped back towards the Double D.

A queer lump came in the judge's throat, a sense of pride and power he'd thought forever gone. One hit like that could be an accident, but never two. Old or not, slow or not, he still knew how to shoot.

A BULLET had gone through Rance Holcum's right shoulder, and another had nicked his arm, but he still could manage a stiff white grin. The judge let Kathie take care of the bandaging. Her hands were steadier than his, and besides, they'd want to be alone. . . .

Slowly, he walked to where Jud Yancey lay, stared down into the twisted face, blonde-mustached devil-mask no longer. Then moved on to Cole, more blood and death. . . . A little sick, he turned away.

Cole Holcum and Yancey. Cold-blooded killers, two of a kind. The end of the owlhoot trail.

He thought of the other—Thad and Kilgore, weakness and greed.

Old King Holcum. The King of Las Crescentes. Ruling an empire, losing his sons. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

Now they were dead, all dead; better off that way.

The living weren't much better. Here was Rance, reluctant prodigal, returning to an empire he didn't want, fighting a war not of his making, to save the girl who'd let him down. Kathie Bren, all woman, torn between love and duty and torturing her soul to reconcile them. . . .

The judge caught himself wondering the worth of the world, and life, and all the bygone years. Soberly, he strolled back to the spot where Rance and Kathie sat.

"You two can stay at my place in town till Las Crescentes is rebuilt," he said. "There's more space than I need."

Silence echoed his words. Then Kathie said: "He isn't staying. He says he's going away." The heart of tragedy was in her voice.

"What kind of nonsense—?"

"No nonsense, Judge." New lines etched Rance's face. "I came back to do a job, and it's done. Now I'm drifting."

The judge looked at them. He could see the pain in both their eyes.

"It took nerve to come back here, Rance," he said at last.

"Forget it."

"The job isn't finished, though. The long part, the hard part—that isn't begun." Abruptly, he made his voice harsh. "Did Yancey get your nerve, Rance? Are you scared to stay?"

"Forget it. It won't work. I'm leaving."

"That isn't fair, Rance. The wolves are running now, but they'll come back once they hear Kathie's a widow, handling the spread alone. This is a hard country. It takes a man to crowd it into line."

"There's plenty of gunhands up for

hire."

Seconds dragged by. The silence grew heavier.

It came to Judge Vreeland, then. All at once, there was the answer—a study in character, simple as it was sharp and clear.

He said: "Did Kathie tell you who saved your neck?"

"Why . . . you did. . . ."

"Did I? How did I happen to be here?"

"No, Judge!" cried Kathie "Please, no—!"

"YOU owe your life to Kathie Bren, Rance Holcum," the judge said as distinctly and forcefully as he knew how. "She fought Thad to come warn you that you were sent to the Evans place to be killed. Her shoulders are cut to ribbons where he whipped her. When she found the marshal wasn't in town, she dragged me out to save you. The only reason she didn't wait to marry you in the first place was because Thad sent her a fake telegram, then stole your letters before she got them." He poured contempt into his voice. "What kind of a lobo does it take to run out on a woman who loves him so much she's risked her own life to save his?"

Rance said: "Kathie—!" He started towards her.

She backed away.

"No, Rance. Not that way—not out of gratitude—"

"You fool! You gorgeous, wonderful fool! Don't you see that I never wanted to go, that I love you as much as you love me? I came back here just for you, but you wouldn't even talk to me. Even now, you'd have let me go without telling me the truth. I thought you wanted me to keep on drifting. . . ."

"Oh, Rance—"

But then Rance had her in his arms. His lips on hers cut off her words. They clung to each other in a taut embrace.

Judge Vreeland cleared his throat.

"I'll leave you now, Kathie. My bones are aching for a bed, and you've got a man who'll take care of you. A new king for Las Crescentes."

He walked to his horse, half smiling. His part was done. He'd brought back Rance, helped set things straight. And if he felt a trifle wistful—well, that was for his youth long gone.

Only then Kathie Bren's arms were around him, her auburn hair soft against his weathered cheek.

"We'll never forget, Judge! Never." Her voice broke, and color came to her cheeks. "We—we'll name our first boy Ben. . . ."

He stared at her, and he couldn't speak. Of a sudden his heart was singing, the drear years fallen like autumn leaves. Shoulders straight, he swung to the saddle.

"And Judge—" Rance's eyes once more were somber. "There'll never be room for kings in this valley again, not while I'm here. The king is dead. I'll run the Crescent as plain Rance Holcum."

Judge Vreeland chuckled, nodded.

"The king is dead," he echoed Rance. And then, beneath his breath: "Long live the king!"

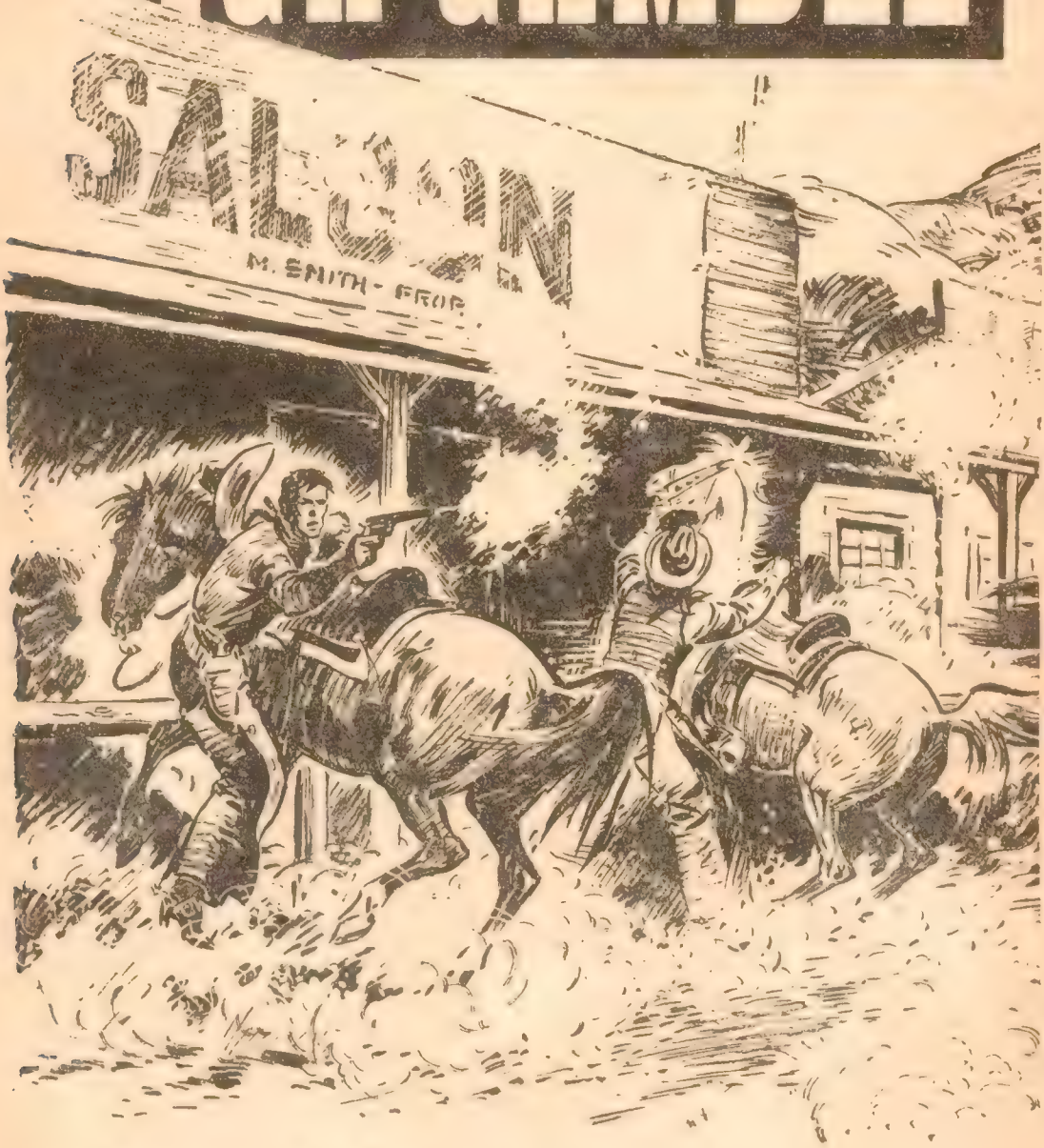
THE END

"THE COURT OF KUBLAI KHAN"

★ By DAVID V. REED ★

READ IT IN THE MARCH FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

HIGH GAMBLE



by Alexander Blade

Morrisey was a tinhorn of the old school. He knew, when to stay, when to leave, and when to draw. Sarah ruined him—into an honest man!

Two fast shots at their feet sent his pursuers scurrying and gave him another fifty yards lead

THREE things Morrisey knew for certain: when to stay; when to leave; and how to draw his gun a split second before the other man. The last had kept him intact for some fifty-odd years. The two former had provided him with a sufficient income to satisfy his simple tastes.

At the moment he was staying. Every dollar he owned was in the center of the round poker table. His investment, he thought, was safe enough. He had dealt the cards, and he knew well enough that the burly stockman sitting opposite him had a full house. Two seats to the left of the stockman a range foreman held four three's, and next to Morrisey on the right sat a man with an ace high flush. Morrisey had dealt himself four tens.

"I'd give my right eye to know what makes you feel so strong," the stockman said as Morrisey shoved his money into the pot.

"You can find out cheaper than that," Morrisey smiled.

The stockman tried to read Morrisey's face, but there was nothing to read. It was a pleasant face, tanned and full with good living. His blue eyes were clear and guileless, his white military mustache and snowy hair cut neatly, as befitted a man who called himself Major Morrisey and who claimed to have nothing on his conscience.

"Come, gentlemen, it's only money you're risking," Morrisey prodded gently.

"Yeah, I'll call," the stockman said.

Just as he covered Morrisey's bet the door of the saloon opened and three men came in. They were covered with trail dust, as though they had come a long way. Morrisey looked up once, then quickly down again. The last time he had seen these three was at a certain poker game in Denver.

What they were doing in this Nevada cattle town Morrisey did not intend to ask. He took a last look at the money on the table and pushed back his chair, at the same time keeping his face averted from the batwing doors. Two guns he might have faced, but not three. It was time to leave.

"Excuse me for a moment, gentlemen," Morrisey said.

He had a quick glimpse of startled, upturned faces and then he was striding toward the back door, which he had located and tested before the game had begun. But he did not move swiftly enough.

"Hey!" a rough voice yelled. "There's that tinhorn who took us in Denver!"

Morrisey kept going. He pulled open the door with enough force so that it bounced shut again after he was through. A flying bullet missed him by feet as he ducked low and swung for the corner of the wooden building. Feet pounded inside.

Morrisey came around the corner and ran toward the front of the saloon. By the time his pursuers had a chance to figure out which way he had gone Morrisey was sliding under the hitching rail. A single tug freed his reins as he swung into the saddle.

He was half way down the street before they were even aboard their horses, but that was not security enough for him. Deftly he slid the gun from beneath his frock coat. Two fast shots at their feet sent his pursuers dodging and gave him another fifty yards lead.

Several times in the next half hour Morrisey knew he could have killed the three behind him. They gave no heed to cover. But Morrisey had no intention of either killing or taking a chance on being killed. His money was gone, and while he was none too

happy about that he could see no point in risking his life because of it.

HE WAS pursued well past the point where the trail ended. Then they were among rolling foothills where cover was plentiful and the drumming behind him stopped. Morrisey slowed his lathered horse to a walk, wiped his own face dry, and kept moving.

His direction remained westward. By the next morning he was close to the mountains. He stopped to water his horse and to have a drink for himself. Then he carefully folded his coat and lay down for a bit of sleep beneath a sheltering tree.

For several days he picked his way through those mountains. He was not sure of his intentions but he knew that beyond the mountains lay California, and that seemed as good a place as any. For a man as proficient with a gun as Morrisey there was no fear of the long journey. He was used to travelling alone, and as long as there was game he would not starve.

Then disaster overtook him, in the shape of a tiny pebble which lay just off the center of the steep mountain trail. Morrisey's horse stepped on the pebble. A moment later Morrisey was flinging himself out of the saddle to avoid being rolled upon by the falling animal.

Morrisey got to his feet with no injury more painful than a bruise on his hip. But his horse lay writhing, its right foreleg broken. Morrisey used one bullet to put the animal out of its misery. Then he sat down on a rock to take stock of the situation.

In a similar predicament most men would have been frightened; the nearest town was hundreds of miles away. To turn back would be unhealthy, at the least. To continue on without a horse verged on the suicidal. Yet Morrisey was not afraid. He knew that fear begets only fear. His course would have to be determined by the best reasoning of which he was capable.

His decision was to continue ahead. There had been a close contest which had been decided by the lone fact that Morrisey was by nature an adventurer. He had never been in California; therefore he wanted to go there.

For the next few days he had no reason to regret his choice. A pair of plump rabbits supplied him with meat, edible berries were plentiful, and here and there mountain springs bubbled forth fresh clear water. Morrisey made good time.

Then it began to grow colder. At times his path was almost straight up, and the higher he went the colder it got. His frock coat was not enough to protect him, but it was all he had. During the cold nights it served as a blanket.

More ominous, even, was the fact that the higher he went the thinner became the vegetation. Now there were no berries. Another rabbit had to last two full days. The day after the last of the rabbit had been consumed Morrisey was unable to find water.

By now he bore little resemblance to the man who had sat at the poker table. His trousers were ragged and dirty and stained with blood. His coat was torn and covered with countless wrinkles. His boots were scuffed and scratched and beginning to wear thin. White stubble covered his face. His hat had been lifted by a sudden gust of wind which had almost blown Morrisey off a steep trail and into a chasm.

NEVERTHELESS he refused to give way to panic. He had faced death many times, and while this promised to be a lingering death it was no

more certain than a swift one. He moved more slowly, but still steadily ahead, resting often to conserve his failing strength.

When he finally came onto the California slope he was almost too weak to be aware of it. Only slowly did the realization dawn on him that he was going downhill. The knowledge gave him fresh strength, and when the vicious scream of a mountain lion sounded almost in Morrisey's ear he refused to give way to the paralysis which might have been expected.

Morrisey whirled to meet the big cat as it sprang, and as he turned his hand dipped swiftly beneath his coat. His first shot landed between the green eyes; his second found the animal's heart.

The meat was tough and wild tasting, Morrisey found, but he would have eaten it had it been as tough as leather. And it gave him strength. When he had eaten as much as he thought safe, after such a long fast, he rested. Then he set to work with his pocketknife, cutting strips of meat from the carcass. As much as he could carry he took with him.

His luck had turned. From that point onward conditions improved; Morrisey ran across an old pack trail that was a sure guide to some sort of civilization. He found that the trail had been cut to follow the meanderings of a small stream that led steadily downward.

When the meat he carried was gone Morrisey had the good fortune to wing a small bird. It was enough to finish his journey. On a late afternoon there came to him through a thick screen of trees the sound of far off voices. Within an hour he discovered that he had come upon a small town built against the mountainside. Still later, under a clear and moonlit sky, Morrisey took his first step down the main street.

His hair was long and matted and his whiskers had grown to beard size; his mustache drooped over the corners of his mouth. His clothes were no more than rags. But Morrisey walked erect. He was alive; his wits were as good as ever. The rest would take care of itself.

From the outside the clapboard shanty looked no different than any of the town's other buildings, but there came to Morrisey an aroma that led him directly to that one door. He looked inside.

Three lanterns swung from the ceiling furnished light. There was a long counter and some stools. Two men whose clothes showed they were miners sat busily forking food into their mouths. Watching them with folded arms was a neatly dressed, plump woman of about Morrisey's age.

"Good evening," Morrisey said. He was surprised at the weakness of his voice. Three pairs of eyes swung his way.

"No free meals," the plump woman told him curtly.

"Madam . . ." Morrisey began.

Suddenly the lamps were swaying and Morrisey felt his knees giving way. He tried to stay on his feet. No use. He felt himself falling. The floor came up to meet him and for a moment he thought he was going to faint. He was not the fainting kind.

Rough hands turned him over on his back, then helped him to his feet and onto a stool. A cup of hot coffee was pressed against his lips. As the scalding liquid ran down his throat Morrisey felt his strength come back.

"He's drunk," one of the miners said.

"If he was drunk you could smell it on his breath," the woman's voice said, more softly this time. "The poor old

man's probably fainted from hunger."

"Madam," Morrisey said weakly, "I am no older than you."

He pushed the miners away and put his hands on the counter to steady himself. The woman was standing there, looking down at him. She was noticing his shoes.

"You walk over the mountains?" she asked. Morrisey saw that she was prepared to doubt him if he said he had. He shook his head.

"I flew."

THE miners had finished their meal and were near the door. They laughed at his reply but did not wait to hear more.

"Now, would you mind getting me something to eat?" Morrisey went on.

The woman's face turned red. "Let's see your money."

"Trusting soul, aren't you?" Morrisey snarled. For once he let his anger get the better of him. He started to rise but the woman waved him down. Her eyes were not unkind.

"I got a lot of dishes I been too busy to wash," she said.

"All right. Can I have a couple of eggs until you make something more substantial?"

"Eggs are eighty cents apiece," she told him as she walked back toward the kitchen. "There wouldn't be that many dishes to wash in this whole town."

When she came out of the kitchen she carried a plate of bread and cold meat and another cup of coffee. While Morrisey ate that she went back and started some potatoes frying. Presently there was wafted to his nostrils the smell of what could only be a steak. There was enough to fill him, hungry as he was. When he was finished he rose, bowed, and started for the door.

"The dishes," the woman behind the counter said. Morrisey looked down his nose at her.

"Madam, you have the pleasure of addressing Major Alfred Morrisey."

"And you've had the pleasure of eating Sarah Borden's cooking." She bent and came up with an empty bottle. "Now that we're introduced we can get down to cases. Do you wash those dishes or do I part your hair with this?"

Morrisey weighed the odds. This plump and gray haired woman was hard to figure. Her voice could be soft and pleasant or it could be loud and strident. Her eyes had a way of changing from solicitude to wrath. Morrisey backed down.

He had thought, after she led him into the kitchen and emptied a pail of boiling water into a large pan of cold and showed him the appallingly high stacks of dirty dishes, that she was going to leave him alone. But she stayed to watch him remove what was left of his coat.

"You didn't happen to come up the trail from below, did you?" she asked suddenly. Morrisey thought her voice showed worry.

"Why?"

"You might have heard something about the stage to Sacramento."

"It happens, madam, that I came over from the Nevada side."

His knees were buckling again and Morrisey grabbed the sides of the pan and held on. The next thing he knew she had pushed a chair against the back of his knees and he was sitting down.

"That's quite a hike for a man your age," she said grimly. He started to say something and she cut him off. "I ain't asking any questions."

"Where can I get a bed for the night?" Morrisey asked.

"There's a hotel. If you've got money."

His first shot landed between the green eyes

Morrisey was going to tell her that she knew he had no money. But he was too tired to talk. His belly was full; now all he wanted was sleep. It didn't make any difference to him if he slept on solid rock. A man as tired as he was would have no trouble falling asleep.

HE FELT a substantial arm slide around his waist as he stumbled to his feet. Then he was being helped through a doorway at the side of the kitchen and into a tiny room. Morrisey fell onto the bed. It seemed to him that he could sleep forever.

When he awoke he felt that he must have slept for days. Sunlight came faintly through a tightly stretched sheet of oiled paper which served as a window. But he felt completely refreshed. For a man his age Morrisey's resilience was remarkable.

He swung his legs off the bed and saw that his boots had been removed. They stood under a chair at the head of the bed, and he bent and slid them on. His coat hung over the back of the same chair and his gun was on the seat. Morrisey shrugged into the coat and slid the gun under it. As he stood up Sarah Borden came in. She was smiling.

"Thirty-six hours is a good sleep," she said. Her eyes skipped to the seat of the chair and back again. "I expect you'll be hungry."

He was more than hungry; he was hollow. This time he ate in the kitchen, at a rough deal table next to the big woodburner. Three plates of flapjacks and a quart of coffee later he leaned back and ran his finger delicately across his mustache.

"You have been very kind, madam. Rest assured that you will be repaid as soon as I can get my hands on some money."

"Quit calling me madam. It makes me feel funny. Everybody around here calls me Sarah. And as for being paid, I guess not. Second place, there ain't many ways for an honest man to make money around here. Unless you want to take a pick and see if you can dig yourself some gold."

At the mention of gold Morrisey's blood quickened. He remembered the two miners. All he needed was a deck of cards and a small stake. A mining town was certain to be good pickings.

"First, some clothes," he mused half to himself.

"Happens I've got some that might

do," she said.

She went into the bedroom and pulled a large trunk and a small metal box from beneath the bed. The small box went back. From the trunk she pulled a black suit and some shirts and string ties. There was a pair of boots, worn but still serviceable.

"The boots might be a little tight," she said.

Morrisey tried them on and found that they were not tight at all. He looked up at her. "Your husband's?"

"He's dead. It doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry," Morrisey said. He meant it.

"I'm not. If he'd been any good I wouldn't have to be running a hash house."

Morrisey was beginning to find this woman exceedingly interesting. She had a combination of motherliness and hard-headedness that appealed to him. Past the age when women can be beautiful, she still carried herself well and she could have been called handsome. And she was very clean, both in her person and the small shack that served her as business place and home. A man wouldn't have to worry about dysentery if he ate here, Morrisey thought.

She left the room so that he could put on a clean shirt and the black suit, and Morrisey found that her husband had been about his height but much thicker through the middle. He made certain that the excess of cloth would not hamper his draw and then went through the kitchen to the front.

"Quite an improvement," Sarah Borden said after a look at him. "Now, if you go down the street to the blacksmith shop maybe Tom Edwards will cut your hair and give you a shave. He does all of the barbering around here."

She dug a quarter out of her apron pocket and tossed it to Morrisey. "Come back here afterwards."

He had been aware for some time that she had something on her mind. It seemed to him that now, when the place had no customers, would be the best time to discuss it.

"Let's get down to cases, as you said the other night," Morrisey told her. A smile lit her face.

"All right. I want to make you a proposition. This place is a little too much for a woman to run alone. Drunken prospectors can be pretty hard to handle."

"Are you offering me a job?"

"You need one, don't you? I'll pay good wages. The work might be harder than what you're used to, from the looks of your hands, but I figure a man who made the trip you did should be able to handle it."

"I wouldn't be interested."

"You'd be doing me a real favor. And you could make a stake for yourself."

MORRISEY thought it over. He felt himself under an obligation. But the idea of himself working in a place like this was not pleasant to him. He was about to say no again when he saw the same worried look on her face that he had noticed before.

"What about that stage to Sacramento?" was what he said. She shook her head.

"I'll tell you about that later."

"Then I'll give you my answer later," Morrisey grunted. He turned to go and stopped as the door opened.

Morrisey found himself facing a tall, heavy-set man with a swarthy, pocked face and a thin knife scar running along his right cheek. The man was flashily dressed, his gun-belt inlaid with silver and his vest edged with silk piping. He was wearing an unpleasant smile that ran off crookedly to meet the lower

end of the scar.

"Like to talk to you, Sarah," he said in a flat voice.

"Well, I don't want to talk to you, Kane."

"You should. This is the last time I'll make my offer." His smile widened so that crooked yellowish teeth showed.

"You're too anxious."

"Not at all, Sarah. I'd just like to have all the men eat at my place. When they eat here they're likely to be so full they just go home to sleep afterward."

"Yes. And if they ate the slop you serve they'd need a few drinks to go with it so they could get it down. And after they got drunk they could get in one of those crooked games you run, and lose their hard-earned dust."

Kane laughed, a low rumbling laugh that stretched his lips thin and showed all his teeth. It was a sound that carried no humor.

"I wouldn't say that," he told her when he had stopped laughing.

"I would. And I know what I'm talking about."

Kane's eyes had developed a steely glitter. "Three thousand is a lot of money, especially when it's for something you don't even own."

"That's what I mean. It would be too much even if I had a claim, which you know I haven't. At least not yet."

"Intending to file one?" He was smiling again.

"That's my business."

Kane shrugged one shoulder. It was plain that he had nothing more to say. A moment later he was slamming the door behind him as he went out. Morrisey looked from the door to Sarah Borden.

"I gather he wants to buy you out because of your nuisance value. Three thousand dollars is a lot of money. You could go places with that much." He said it easily, yet wanting to hear the reply.

"I've been places. This one is good enough for me."

Morrisey shrugged and went out. It was his first look at the town in daylight. Thinking back to the night on which he had stumbled into it he realized how tired he must have been. The main street ran sharply downhill, yet to him it had seemed that he was climbing. Had it really been so he could never have made it.

Shacks lined the dirt street. Most of them seemed solidly built, but at the same time managed to give the impression of impermanence which mining towns had everywhere. Off the street and running back up the slope to which the town clung there were more shacks, widely separated. Not far off Morrisey heard the sound of picks on rock.

He knew this kind of town. All day it would be dead. Then at night the prospectors would come in with their pouches of golden pebbles. The earnings of a hard day's work meant nothing to them but drink and gambling. All of them were by nature gamblers, not figuring to make a pile slowly, but always dreaming of the big strike.

Morrisey passed a general store and an assayer's shack and had to walk another hundred feet before he reached the next building. It was a saloon. From the conversation at Sarah Borden's place Morrisey gathered that the saloon must belong to Kane. Not far beyond that was the blacksmith shop.

TOM EDWARDS turned out to be a gnarled man with wide shoulders and a slight limp. He shook some sparks off his leather apron and peered at Morrisey with near sighted eyes.

"What'll it be?" he asked huskily.

"Shave and a haircut, when you've got time," Morrisey said.

"Reckon I've got the time now." He scattered a layer of ashes over his forge fire and took down a pail of steaming water that had hung above it. From a shelf he took a razor and strop.

After Morrisey had perched himself on an upended barrel the operation proceeded. It was swift, if not very professional. Blood flowed freely from a cut on Morrisey's chin. While he worked, Edwards kept up a running line of chatter.

"Pretty good growth you got. Been up in the hills?"

"I suppose you could say that." At that Edwards laughed.

"Close mouthed, eh? All you fellers are the same. Got that gold in your blood."

Morrisey did not feel like correcting the mistake. Meanwhile he learned something about the town. It had sprung up five years before when a couple of prospectors had found specks of gold in their pans. For a while after that there was a rush. But nobody had really struck it very rich and the rush had subsided. Nevertheless many of the old timers believed that the gold in the stream beds came from a rich lode that cut through the mountainside.

"Darn fools, if you ask me," Edwards grunted. "This has got the makin's of a fine place to live. Beautiful country around here. But they're too interested in diggin' it full of holes to notice."

"A rich vein of ore can buy a lot of pleasures," Morrisey smiled.

"Only one who's goin' to have any gold when the thing is over will be Burt Kane," Edwards told him. "And he ain't diggin' his with no pick"

"I hear he runs some fast games."

The shave and haircut were finished and they were standing at the wide doorway of the shop. Edwards touched Morrisey's sleeve and winked. There was something about the gambler which inspired confidence, he had found. It had made his path easier.

"But don't let on I said anything," Edwards cautioned. "Kane's got some bad boys workin' for him. And he don't like to miss out on a single sucker if he can help it."

That was the opinion Morrisey had already formed. Men like Kane frowned on any legitimate enterprise which might divert some of their business. But Edwards was still talking.

"I guess the bug finally bit him too, though. Hear he's got some men diggin' up yonder in a little gully."

He pointed up the mountain far above Sarah Borden's shack. Morrisey looked but could see nothing. The timber was too thick. It must have been pretty far up, he thought, because he could hear no sounds. Maybe they were working one of the small streams.

WALKING back to the restaurant, Morrisey was tempted to stop at the saloon just to look the place over. He decided against it. There would be nothing at this hour, although a few horses hitched to the rail in front testified that there were at least some early customers. Evening would be a better time. Then he'd see what his chances were.

Behind him there was a sudden drumming of hoofs on the hard street and Morrisey wheeled about. A horse was coming up from below. He could see that it had been ridden hard.

He made way as the rider spurred the horse past him and pulled up at the saloon rail. Then a whoop split the air and brought men tumbling out of the dark interior of the place. Morrisey moved closer, close enough to hear the rider's words.

"They got the Sacramento stage! Cleaned it plumb out and killed the

guard and driver!"

One of the men who had come out of the saloon let out a cry of rage. He looked like a prospector, and from what Morrisey could filter out of the jumble of talk he had sent down a lot of dust.

The rest took it more calmly, although not without interest. It was about as exciting news, Morrisey thought, as was likely to stir a town of this kind. Considering it, he figured Sarah Borden would be interested too.

He was somewhat surprised when she took the news without apparent shock. She had been working in the kitchen when he came in, and after he told her she merely leaned against the table and bit her lip.

"I had a hunch," she said at last. "Never believe in them much, but it sure is funny how they will come true."

"How much did you lose?" Morrisey asked. Her answer surprised him as much as had her reaction to the news.

"Nothing."

"You were pretty worried about nothing, then," Morrisey said.

"My hunch, I guess. I did ask Bill Payton, the shotgun guard, to file a claim for me on the land this place is on. But it isn't important. I've got possession and that's good enough for my purpose."

She brushed back a stray wisp of hair and went back to the dough she had been kneading when Morrisey came in. Over her shoulder she said, "Made up your mind yet?"

"No."

That was not true. He had already decided against it. But until he had some money in his pocket he saw no reason to tell her so. He tried to look straight at her when he saw he had not decided yet, and found that his usually steady gaze failed him. He was glad when the door opened and several men came in and called for Sarah.

While she went to the front and took their orders Morrisey sat down to do some thinking. It was going to be difficult for him to get started without any money at all. She had been kind until now. Maybe she would consider lending him enough to get in a game. Not that he intended to tell her what the money was for. Something told him she would not approve.

A commotion along the counter brought him out of his reverie. There were oaths and the sound of scuffling feet. Morrisey looked up in time to see Sarah Borden knocked aside as she tried to break up a struggle among four men.

At first glance it seemed like an ordinary fight. Then, as the men surged back and forth, there was a crash of falling plates. The counter, none too substantial at best, tipped as their weight hit it. Morrisey hesitated just long enough to see Sarah stop a punch intended for someone else.

He ran forward, unlimbered his gun and at the same time yelling for her to get out of the way. When he was sure she was out of the line of fire Morrisey stopped.

"Break it up!" he said sharply.

His words had no effect at all. There was no sense in wasting more breath, Morrisey decided quickly. He dropped his hand until the gun muzzle pointed at the floor, then pulled the trigger. As though by magic the fight stopped. Four surprised men, still panting from their exertions, faced him.

"What started this, Mrs. Borden?" Morrisey asked calmly. She shook her head in bafflement and Morrisey saw a red mark on her chest where the punch had landed. His lips tightened.

"How much damage did they do?"

SHE figured it up in her mind? There was food spilled around the floor

and mingled with it was broken pottery. When she told him Morrisey nodded.

"Pay up," he said.

"Listen, you old . . ." one of the four broke in.

"As long as this gun is pointing at you you'll do the listening," Morrisey said grimly. "Pay up and get out."

They paid up and got out. Morrisey watched them go and then helped Sarah Borden clean up the mess they had made. The counter was easily tipped back into position.

"I see what you meant when you said some of these fellows were hard to handle," Morrisey observed.

"They didn't used to be, but lately they're acting pretty ornery, some of them."

Her glance at Morrisey was appraising. "You handled that pretty well. And since you got that shave and cut you look lots younger."

"I've told you before . . ."

"That you're no older than I am. My, you sure get your feathers ruffled when anyone mentions your age."

"My age has nothing to do with it," Morrisey said stiffly.

He didn't know why he became so angry when she suggested that he was old. Usually he was quite content for people to think him a kindly old man. Her case was different. He wondered why it should be.

"Anyway," she went on, "I guess it wouldn't be too hard for you to wait on customers while I do the work in back."

"Waiter and bouncer, eh?" Morrisey sneered. "At my age?"

"It's honest work."

Her reply turned Morrisey's cheeks a bright red. He bit his lips. Sarah Borden's opinion of him was apparently none too high.

"Exactly how much do you figure I owe you?" he said hotly.

She drew herself up. "Not a cent. I'd do the same for anyone who needed it. You're not bound in any way. The only reason I asked you to help me out is because I need someone badly. To tell the truth, most of the money I had was on its way to the bank in Sacramento, on the stage that was held up."

Despite her pride there was a note of entreaty in her voice. Morrisey missed that note, although he heard her words. He was already on his way to the door, and while he felt a twinge of sympathy for her he would not turn back.

He had his own fierce pride. The thought that she considered him too old to earn a living except in the most menial ways angered him. Like most gamblers he had been broke many times in his life, but never before had he been ashamed of himself for it.

Morrisey headed for Kane's saloon. Without money there was no way for him to sit in a game. But it might happen that Kane could use a good man. Working for the house was one way to get a start.

A small crowd had gathered around the door of the saloon and Morrisey heard them discussing the holdup of the stage. He brushed past the knot of men and went inside. The same discussion was going on there, and it was being carried on by more men than were outside the place. Morrisey had to look around a bit before he saw Kane at the far end of the bar, talking to a couple of men who looked vaguely familiar.

MORRISEY made his way toward Kane. When he was only a few yards away he saw one of the men look up, then say something to Kane. Kane jerked his head around and watched Morrisey come toward him.

"I'd like to talk to you, Kane," Morrisey said.

"Yeah?" Kane sounded very angry and the scar on his dark cheek showed white. "Well, I got something to say to you. I hear you pulled a gun on a couple of friends of mine."

Before Morrisey could say a word Kane hit him. The blow came up from below the bar and Morrisey had no chance to duck. It caught him high on the cheek and knocked him sprawling.

Anger raced through the white haired man like a flame and his hand started for the gun beneath his coat. Even shooting up from the floor he could have killed Kane before the big man had a chance to draw his own gun. But Morrisey did not draw. What it was that stayed his hand he did not know.

For a moment there was an inward struggle. Then the struggle was over and Morrisey clambered to his feet. His eyes were narrowed to slits. The side of his face felt numb but he knew that would go away and be replaced by an ache. He had been hit before in his long career. What would not subside so quickly was the hate Kane had earned for himself.

"That was letting you off easy," the swarthy man said from between tight lips. He stood straddle legged seeming ready to hit out again. "Next time keep your fool nose out of things that ain't your business."

Morrisey stepped back a safe distance and calmly brushed dust from his coat and trousers.

"So that's the way it is," he murmured.

"That's the way what is?" Kane snarled.

"Nothing." Morrisey took a few more steps backward and Kane laughed, a laugh which was quickly echoed by the two men who had been talking to him. Morrisey recognized them now. They were the ones who had been in the ruckus in the restaurant.

More than a vague suspicion had formed in Morrisey's mind. It looked like a certainty that Kane had sent four of his men to wreck Sarah Borden's place. Kane was the type to do a thing like that.

Still keeping his eye on the big man, Morrisey backed toward the door. He was taking no chances. If Kane had any notion that Morrisey might cause him trouble he would as soon shoot him as not. But there was no shooting and Morrisey was glad of it. He was a man who liked to pick his own time for violence.

Out on the street, he gave his clothes another brushing. Then he made his way down to the restaurant. By now there were several customers. Morrisey went past them and met Sarah Borden coming out of the kitchen. To her surprised stare he returned a cool nod, then continued on.

He washed his face carefully with warm water, then rinsed it with cold. When Sarah Borden came back to the kitchen he had his coat on again and was waiting.

"You stay back here and I'll wait on the counter," Morrisey said without elaboration. "When I get the food you can tell me how much it is."

It pleased him that she accepted his change of heart without questioning. Then she saw the bruise on his cheek and her jaw dropped. "What happened to you?" she asked.

"Never mind," Morrisey said.

He went past her to the front and took up a stand behind the counter. Eyes were lifted in faint astonishment at sight of him but Morrisey seemed not to notice. When another mud-

stained man came in Morrisey took his order as though he had been doing it for years.

FOR the next few hours the white haired gambler was too busy to do much thinking. The men were hungry and they wolfed their food, hardly pausing between bites. Although the place was small the turnover was fast, and mining town prices being what they were Morrisey was amazed at the amount of money that passed through his hands.

He had not had the foresight to eat before the rush, and when a let-up in business came he sank gratefully to a stool and gulped some coffee. Outside the night turned cool and very black and Morrisey sighed as the last customer went out into it. Mrs. Borden came out of the kitchen.

"Tired?" she smiled.

Morrisey admitted honestly that he was. He had a tremendous admiration for a woman who could manage a place like this all by herself. While there had been no trouble there had been plenty of work and he shook his head. The pain in his cheek came back and he rubbed the sore spot.

"Now," Mrs. Borden said, eyeing the ugly bruise, "how did you get that?"

When Morrisey had told her what had happened her face grew grim. "Imagine, hitting a man twice his age!"

"Not quite twice," Morrisey smiled wanly. "At any rate, it looks as though Kane intends to get rid of you any way he can. He made it plain enough that anyone who tries to help you is going to get hurt."

"And knowing that you still turn right around and come back here." She shook her head. "I guess you've got even more spunk than I gave you credit for."

"Madam . . ." Morrisey began. She cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"I'm glad you changed your mind about working for me. But we'd better forget it. I don't want you getting hurt."

"How about you?"

"Oh, I'll be all right. Kane knows the men wouldn't stand for any rough play with a woman."

"My opinion is otherwise," Morrisey said. She shrugged her ample shoulders.

"We'll see. Anyway, I don't think you'd better stay in this town. I'll lend you enough money to move on."

"I doubt if you can afford it," Morrisey said. There was a light in his eyes. "I like to travel in style."

He got to his feet, waving her protests aside. Very carefully he brushed his mustache with his forefinger and used his palm to slick back his white hair.

"Don't be a fool," she said. "I've made plenty here, and not all of it was on that stagecoach."

Morrisey was about to counter with a formal remark, but his usual manner suddenly deserted him. "Sarah, you have been more than kind to me. I wouldn't feel right about leaving. And I can assure you that I'm able to take care of myself. As Mr. Kane is going to find out," he added grimly.

"No fool like an old fool," she said philosophically. Morrisey laughed, much to her surprise.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I'm convinced that there's more to this than we think. I'd like to find out what."

"And how do you figure to do that?"

"When you want information you've got to go to where the information is," he told her; "in this case, Kane's saloon."

She started to argue and then changed her mind, seeing that he could not be dissuaded. Morrisey made her a

slight bow and started for the door, only to be halted by her voice.

"You'll need some money in a place like that."

"Since you're so free with it," Morrisey smiled, "I could use a few hundred dollars."

"Are you a gambling man?" Sarah asked. Her eyes were ready to condemn him if he was.

"Only fools gamble," Morrisey said virtuously.

HE TOLD himself that he had spoken the truth. Like most men who are called gamblers, Morrisey preferred to leave little to the laws of chance. When he bet he wanted to have a sure thing, or as close to it as he could get.

He heeded her admonition to wait, and watched her disappear into the back room. When she returned she carried a roll of bills in her hand. Morrisey blinked as she extended the money.

"No questions?" he said.

"When I trust a man I trust him," she said flatly. "If you find out anything it'll be worth the money."

There was a jaunty set to Morrisey's shoulders as he breasted the batwing doors of the saloon and made his way into the big smoke filled room. The place was filled with the odors of stale cooking, whisky, and of men who did not bathe often.

A faro dealer had a table against a back wall and there were several games of poker going, all with house dealers. Kane stood behind one of the dealers and when he saw Morrisey come in he started forward.

Morrisey quickly shoved his way to the bar and flashed his roll, calling for a drink. His maneuver was successful. Kane stopped short when he saw the money.

Morrisey took his time getting the drink down and dawdled even longer over his second one. He tried to drum up a conversation with some of the men near him and found that they were a tight lipped, hard bitten bunch. They drank fast and had no time to waste on conversations with strangers.

When the white haired man felt he had been around long enough he left the bar and picked his way to a far table where there was a seat open in a poker game. He arrived just in time to see two house men whipsaw a miner who sat between them.

"Game ain't hard and nobody's barred," the dealer grinned up at Morrisey. "Care to sit in, old timer?"

"Reckon I will," Morrisey said, his eyes innocent.

He slid into the chair and flattened his money on the table before him, and nodded around to the other players. There were six altogether, including himself; four outsiders and the two house men.

His usual practice was to avoid all house games, but in the present situation he was content. He threw away his first five or six hands with barely a look at them, intent only on the dealer. On the second deal he caught that gentleman dealing from the bottom.

The sleight of hand was well performed, too fast for the eye to catch, but Morrisey's alert ear heard the telltale swish that gave it away. Then he settled back to play. He caught two pair, and when the house men dropped he took a small pot from the others.

In the next half hour Morrisey was content to win another pair of small pots, letting his pile grow slightly. In the meantime he built himself a hand. His method was simple and unobtrusive.

When he picked up his cards he

looked them over swiftly, and if he was not staying he telescoped them neatly and held them between a thumb and forefinger. But every so often the top card slipped into his palm, deposited for later use. It was impossible to see, as he threw the rest into the discards, that he was returning only four instead of the five he had been dealt.

Figuring that small cards were the most likely not to be missed, Morrisey saved sixes. It took a while to collect all four of those but he was in no hurry. They were well concealed by his naturally curving palm.

His chance to use the hand he had accumulated came on a deal where everybody stayed. The cards he had been dealt were worthless, but Morrisey stayed and drew one, as though to two pair or a straight or flush. He caught the glance that flew between the leader and the house man, then heard the swish of a card sliding from the bottom of the deck.

WHEN the betting was over all of Morrisey's money was in the pot. He watched the house man confidently turn up a full house, then spread his four sixes and raked in the pot.

The dealer's jaw dropped. He knew, or he thought he knew, that he had not dealt Morrisey four sixes. Yet there they were. The house man was glaring at the dealer and Morrisey had to hold in his laughter. He knew how they felt.

But mistakes are always possible, and that was the way they had to figure it. The game went on. Morrisey started to build another hand. This time it added up to a small straight flush. He bided his time until the proper moment arrived and then made another killing.

If ever he had seen consternation on a man's face it was on the dealer's. Had a ghost pulled his chair from under him that worthy could not have been more startled. Or more frightened. Sweat gathered on his brow in little beads.

"Best run of luck I ever had." Morrisey chuckled.

He slapped his hand down on the pile of discards and got rid of the extra cards in his hand. If he was any judge there was going to be a count. Morrisey had it figured right. Kane was on his way to the table and he had a vicious look in his eyes. The dealer scooped up the cards and counted swiftly. There were fifty-two.

There was nothing for Kane to do but take it as a matter of luck. Trying to put a good face on it he bellied out his false laugh. Too many men were watching.

"You're doing nicely, old timer," he said. Morrisey looked at the pile of money in front of him and smiled innocently.

"Never saw the beat of it," he admitted. "I'd stay for more but it's gettin' past my bed time." He stuffed the money into his pocket and got up.

"Lemme buy you a drink before you go," Kane said hastily.

Morrisey could not refuse. Trailing the big man to the bar he accepted the drink and tossed it down as though he suspected nothing. But he turned down Kane's offer of another.

He stood a while, outside the saloon, adjusting his eyes to the darkness. Morrisey was sorry now that he had not resisted the temptation to take Kane's money. That could have waited until later. In the meantime he had learned nothing.

Half way up the street a man drifted along in the shadows and Morrisey moved over to the opposite side as he walked along. He watched the other halt and start to cross over. Morrisey

turned to face him directly. And behind him there was the scuffle of feet on earth.

Too late Morrisey became aware of the fresh danger. He whirled to see a dark bulk loom behind him and then a descending gun barrel knocked him off balance. Had he not been moving it would have cracked his skull. As it was, he staggered back against the wall of a shack. Somehow he managed to slide away as both his attackers charged him.

He dug for his gun and was too slow. A fist thudded against his head and drove him back. Falling, he still managed to pull the trigger. But even the blast of the gun was not enough to keep the darkness from closing in on him.

He awoke thinking that he was drowning. Then another bucketful of cold water hit him in the face and he became aware of the circle of men around him. He was lying up against the wall of the shack where he had fallen.

"Are you all right?" someone asked.

It was Sarah Borden. Morrisey looked up at her and nodded weakly. He felt sick inside but his strength came back rapidly. With her help he managed to gain his feet. From all sides questions flew at him but Morrisey shook them off. Nothing he could tell them. He felt in his pocket and discovered that the money was still there.

HIS fight had not been in vain. But even as he bent to retrieve the gun which had fallen from his limp fingers his momentary feeling of satisfaction vanished. From further up the street there was a cry of fire. Before he looked Morrisey knew where the fire was.

Not more than one full minute could have elapsed before they reached the scene. But even that was too long. The flames had got a good start and the dry wood burned like tinder. In the time it might take a man to smoke a cigarette Sarah Borden's shack was gone.

They stood back from the roaring flames, watching the sky turn orange overhead. From somewhere nearby a couple of men brought buckets of water which proved completely ineffectual. With a sudden hissing and crackling, and then a blast that sounded like a gunshot, the roof caved in. Five minutes later there were only smoldering embers surrounding the iron wood-burner.

"Sure went quick," someone said. Sarah Borden shot him a fierce look.

"Too quick. I couldn't have been gone more than a minute or so. And there was no fire in the stove when I left."

It added up to a single fact. The fire had been set with no other intention except to burn down the shack. Morrisey heard angry talk from a few of the men, but as far as he could see there was no more hope of catching the one who had set the fire than of finding the men who had slugged him.

"Looks like we're both out of a job," Sarah Borden said sadly. "You got any of that money left?"

Morrisey hauled out a fist full of bills and watched her eyes pop. Without bothering to count he gave her approximately half and put the rest back in his pocket.

"That ought to be enough for a fresh start," he said. "But you've lost your hired man."

If he had thought she would be hurt he was surprised. Instead of a frown he got a smile.

"Good. I'm glad you decided to get out of here. All I lost was my business. You pretty near lost your life

tonight."

"Madam, if you think I am going to run out on you then you are sadly mistaken. Somebody is going to find that he can't trifle with Major Alfred Morrisey of any friend of his. I am going to get to the bottom of this."

The crowd had drifted away, leaving the two of them alone. As Morrisey spoke his shoulders squared and he ran his hand angrily through his hair. He was a fine looking man, especially when he was angry.

"Are you really a major?" she said suddenly.

"Don't be a fool, Sarah." His anger broke and he was smiling at her. "But we'll talk about that some other time. Now we'd better find a place for you to stay the night. I can bunk anywhere."

Anywhere meant for Morrisey the hotel. His bed consisted of a straw-stuffed mattress supported by planks. Nevertheless he got a good night's sleep. He was the kind of man who left his worries behind when he went to bed.

He rose early, with the sun, and found that he was not the first awake. It was the sound of hammering which had brought him from his sleep, and he went out to discover that the hammering came from the site where Sarah Borden's shack had stood.

The ashes had been cleared from a considerable part of the area. While two men dug post holes another pair drove the poles into the ground. Green saplings were being laid swiftly between the posts by a couple of others. And Burt Kane, his eyes bleary from lack of sleep, hurried the job along with rumbling curses.

Kane watched Morrisey come along the street and the white haired man saw that the other's eyes were wary. Morrisey nodded a polite greeting, as though he had no concern in the matter, and Kane loosened slightly. But he left it to Morrisey to speak first.

"There are plenty of other places for Mrs. Borden to build," he remarked.

"All right with me," Kane told him. The false smile flashed briefly. "I figure as long as this piece was vacant I could use it for a corral. It's handy to my place."

The explanation was so obviously false that Morrisey let it pass. If a dozen horses saw the inside of that corral in the next year it would be a great surprise to everyone.

AS A barefaced fraud it beat anything Morrisey had ever seen. And he intended to do something about it. He had not yet decided what it was he would do, but that was merely because he was not certain what lay behind Kane's action.

Slowly but surely the impression was building up in the back of his mind that Kane was motivated by something more than a desire to drive Sarah Borden out of business. Kane was greedy enough for that too, grasping enough so that he would begrudge every dollar which for one reason or another slipped through his hands.

Morrisey felt Kane's eyes on his back as he went down the street. Burt Kane was not easily fooled, and Morrisey knew that his movements would be watched closely. His pretense of not caring what Kane did had been thin.

But if anyone were watching him that day, that person would have had little to report. For Morrisey seemed to have developed a sudden interest in nature. By the time the sun was fully up he had left the town below his and was climbing up along the trails that led to the diggings.

The tiny town lay clearly in sight

beneath him as he climbed, and Morrisey managed to drift over until he was directly above the corral Kane was building. Between the spot where Morrisey stood and that point there was no activity.

It was only after Morrisey had moved further up that he found what he sought, although he did not linger long over his discovery. At a point still in a straight line with the corral he came upon the signs of digging.

Here there had been no attempt to follow an old stream bed. Instead it was the face of the rock itself which had been attacked. The surface was sheer at this point, tiny bits of quartz glinting like jewels between layers of stone.

A queer formation, Morrisey thought, the layers of rock running almost vertically in places. It looked as though a giant knife had at one time lopped off a chunk of the mountain, the pressure being sufficient to distort even the stone that remained.

He squatted on his heels while he considered the thing. It was a matter of plain logic as far as he was concerned. Kane had started digging along here, and he must have begun in the expectation of finding something. But he had apparently not found it. So he had stopped.

Simple enough. And Morrisey had to admit that if there was a connection between that fact and what Kane was doing now, it was not easy to say what that connection was. Maybe there was none. But Morrisey was a stubborn man, and his outthrust jaw showed it as he bit down hard in concentration.

IT WAS late when the answer came to him, and his thighs ached from the posture he had assumed, but his pace downward was swift. He had a hunch that once Kane had got this far he would be moving fast.

There was only one possible solution to the problem, and there was only one man who could verify that solution. Kane had stumbled on it. He would have gone to the same man. And now he would need that man no longer. Knowing that, Morrisey hurried all the more.

He came into town at the upper end, far above the corral, which was already nearing completion. Morrisey went past it without a second look. He continued on past Kane's saloon and stopped before the assayer's place which he had noticed when he had gone to the blacksmith to get his hair cut.

The door was closed and Morrisey knocked. After knocking several times more he gave it up. Around the side was an oiled paper window and he used his fist to put a hole in it. There was enough light so Morrisey could see inside, and he sucked in a breath at what he saw.

Dust was thick on the floor and on the tables which had held the assayer's equipment. A chair lay on its side against the far wall. A little further along some books were stacked, and those too were covered with a film of the gray dust.

Morrisey cursed angrily under his breath. He had not considered the possibility that the man he sought might be gone. Turning away from the window he stepped onto the street and was starting toward the blacksmith's shop when he saw Sarah Borden coming in his direction. She watched him sharply.

"Were you looking for someone in there?" she asked as they met.

"Yes. The assayer. Looks like he hasn't been around for some time."

"About a month. He killed himself. A couple of the men found him along

one of the trails. He'd blown his brains out."

Morrisey grinned wolfishly, the twisted smile looking out of place on his usually placid countenance. The information had not been entirely unexpected.

"It couldn't have been Kane's men who found him, could it?" he asked.

"I don't remember. And if you're hinting that someone might have killed him, I'm inclined to agree with you. He never struck me as the kind who'd commit suicide. But nobody else seemed to care either way. Dead men aren't too uncommon around here. The only thing that'll get these prospectors mad enough to do anything is claim jumping."

Morrisey nodded thoughtfully. It was much the same in cattle country. Men minded their own business, and the only community action came against cattle rustlers and horse thieves. Otherwise a man was expected to take care of his own.

Until now Morrisey had found that quite satisfactory. He had never lacked confidence in himself. But this was going to be different. While he had stood talking to Sarah the answer had come to him like a flash.

He knew now what he was going to do, and for the most part he could manage it alone. In a characteristic gesture he ran his hand through his hair while he thought out details.

"There's a stage to Sacramento tomorrow," Sarah said abruptly, breaking into his thoughts. "I'm figuring to be on it. How about you?"

"No. And you won't be on it either. You held out this long; another few days won't matter."

SHE shook her head, but Morrisey could see that she was pleased. He knew that her pleasure came from the thought that he was staying to help her. In his own mind he did not see it that way. He was merely going to settle his account with Kane.

"I can run a hash house anywhere," she told Morrisey. "If you think you're doing me a favor, you're not. There's nothing here for either of us."

Long experience had taught Morrisey not to argue with a woman. And even his short acquaintance with Sarah Borden had been sufficient to teach him that she had a mind of her own. Being a man who did not enjoy useless pursuits he changed the subject.

"Very well. I can't prevent you from going. On the other hand, you can't make me leave with you."

"But why?" She was plainly distressed. "I know you've got enough money now so you can go."

His answer made her eyes pop.

"It happens I have decided to do some prospecting."

"You're crazy! What you need is someone to look after you. It's bad enough when the young ones get gold fever. At your age you ought to know better."

Morrisey almost reminded her that he was not so old but she kept talking. She was still talking when he bowed and walked away.

"No fool like an old fool," she called after him.

He was no longer listening. Now that he had decided on a course of action he was impatient to get started. Nor did he have any too much time. Looking up at the sky, Morrisey saw that it was almost noon.

Tom Edwards was beating a wagon axle when Morrisey came in and the noise in the shop was so great that the white haired man's voice could not be heard. Morrisey had to tap the blacksmith on the shoulder to get his attention.

"You won't be wanting another shave so soon?" Edwards asked in disbelief.

"No. I want to buy a pick and shovel and some other stuff."

"Huh! I knew the minute I laid eyes on you that you were one of 'em." He leaned close to Morrisey and his tone grew confidential. "You're new around there parts. My advice is to try panning some of the streams lower down."

Morrisey thanked him for the advice but insisted on the pick and shovel. When he had paid for those he hurried out, leaving Edwards to stand in the doorway scratching his head.

There was no doubt that Morrisey looked like an unusual sort of prospector, dressed in a black frock coat and carrying a pick and shovel on his shoulder. But the amused stares he drew from some of the men on the street did not trouble him. If they wanted to think him crazy, that was all right.

He had a fair idea as to where he was going. On his way up in the morning he had noticed several places which looked as though they might be suitable for his purpose. It turned out that the first of them was too close to town. The second was not as well situated as had seemed at first sight.

Only after he had gone far up the mountain did Morrisey find what he was seeking. It was a small gully, dug long ago by some wayward stream, so that there remained a gravel bed. In time the walls of the gully had become overgrown with bushes and tall grass, tall enough to reach almost to Morrisey's head. Further along there was a bend and then the gully sloped upward until it faded out among the rocks.

Morrisey dropped down and picked his way around the bend. Selecting a spot which was well screened by bushes he went to work. Strangely enough, most of his work was done with his pocket knife. When he had finished there he moved back to survey what he had done and found it satisfactory.

THEN he made his way back along the bed, stopping here and there to pick at the gully wall. Within an hour he had dug some fair-sized holes, and, sweating and panting from his exertions, was ready to quit. The pick and shovel he dropped behind the screen of bushes at the far end of the gully.

He took the easy way out, climbing the few feet from the sheltered place along the rocks behind the bushes. Walking around the rim of the gully to a point which overlooked the bushes, he stood for a moment staring down. As far as he could see everything was going to work out as he planned.

With a sigh of relief he noted that he still had plenty of time. That he would waste a good deal of that time could not be helped. He had to find his way by ear, and sometimes sound was misleading.

Further up and to one side Morrisey could hear steel ring against stone and he made his way in that direction. Twice he had to stop and turn back at the edges of chasm which appeared before him. But at last he hit on a definite trail which took him the rest of the way.

Morrisey came off the trail into a section which looked as though it was well worked. There had been plenty of digging done around there, and there was still plenty being done. Directly below him, in a rocky ravine, a man chopped steadily with a pick. Morrisey was careful to make his voice loud enough.

"Hey!" he shouted.

Below him the man dropped his pick and dug for a gun as he turned. But

Morrisey stood clearly exposed on the rim, his hands held carefully high, so that there was no question that his intentions were peaceable.

It was a man almost as old as himself who watched him clamber down, but a man whose back was ridged with muscle and whose face was as hard as the rock he had been digging at. Wary eyes watched Morrisey every inch of the way.

"Lookin' for something?" the grizzled prospector asked suspiciously. He kept his hand on the gun butt.

"Looking to buy something," Morrisey told him.

"I got nothin' to sell."

"Maybe you have. And I'm willing to pay more than you can get anywhere else."

Morrisey dropped his hand slowly into his pocket and came up with a thick bundle of folding money. The prospector kept his eyes glued to Morrisey's hand, but it was not the money he was interested in. Like all his kind he was suspicious of anyone whom he did not know well. Morrisey talked fast and convincingly. And he was willing to pay better than a fair price.

Night shadows were falling when Morrisey got back to town. He was tired but the tiredness did not prevent him from feeling pleased with his day's labors. He paused to observe one of Kane's men hook a leg possessively over the top rail of the corral and take a seat that showed he was going to be there a while.

The white-haired man nodded to himself. He'd had more confirmation of his suspicions. Down the street a couple of drunken men were brawling in the dust but Morrisey went past them without a second glance. Then he crossed over and entered the saloon.

Kane was not around and Morrisey whiled away an hour over a couple of drinks and some cold roast beef that satisfied his hunger but not his palate. He refused an invitation to get into a poker game, killed another half hour watching the faro dealer ply his trade. Morrisey was beginning to get anxious when Burt Kane entered through a door at the far end of the bar.

KANE seemed in a jovial mood, very different from his usual self. When he saw Morrisey his face darkened momentarily but lit up again as the older man threaded his way toward him. His attitude even verged on the friendly.

"Come back to make another killing?" he asked as Morrisey came up. Morrisey hesitated as though fearful and Kane bellied out his false laugh. "Still thinking about me hitting you? Forget it. I was just excited, that's all."

"Sure." Morrisey appeared relieved.

"If you're looking for a good game—" Kane said.

"Maybe later. Right now I'd like to talk to you. Alone."

Kane surveyed Morrisey thoughtfully, his hard eyes suddenly suspicious. But there was nothing about Morrisey to hint that he had anything up his sleeve besides his arm and Kane nodded.

"Back here," he said slowly. "In my office."

Morrisey followed him to the end of the bar and through the door from which Kane had stepped into the saloon. On the other side of the door was a tiny office containing a scarred desk, a few chairs and a substantial looking green safe.

"Now. What's on your mind, old timer?"

For reply Morrisey reached into a bulging pocket and produced a letter bag securely tied with a drawstring. As though he hated to part with it he

laid it on the desk.

"I figured you'd have a safe. Maybe you could keep this for me. Almost got held up last night and I don't want it to happen again."

Kane nodded absent-mindedly, at the same time lifting the pouch and hefting it. His fingers idled with the string that held it closed. The pouch was the sort in which prospectors kept their dust, and at the weight of it Kane's eyes widened in hot interest. A man would be lucky to grub out that much gold in a month.

"Heard you were out digging today," he said softly.

"Just looking around." Morrisey said it hurriedly, as though to forestall further questions, but his face gave him away.

Kane had found out all he wanted to know and he dropped the subject. Morrisey watched him open the safe and deposit the pouch on a shelf. When the door of the safe closed again the older man heaved a sigh of relief.

"I didn't want to show that around," he said. "You know how these fellows are." Kane nodded understandingly and Morrisey said, "If you could give me a couple of hundred against the dust I'd like to gamble some now."

"Take five hundred," Kane said expansively.

It was more than Morrisey had wanted, especially since he was going to lose, but he could not refuse. In a way he was surprised that Kane had not urged him to take more.

Morrisey left the office alone, feeling Kane's eyes of his back, and found a table where there was a seat open. For a short time his cards were good. Then his luck changed and he lost steadily until the five hundred dollars was gone.

SARAH BORDEN had spent the night before at the Edwards' home, with Tom and his wife, and it was there Morrisey went when he left the saloon. He found the three gathered close about a kerosene lamp, reading a three month old Sacramento newspaper.

"Thought you'd be too tired from your digging to come down tonight," Sarah said by way of greeting.

Morrisey was tired enough; more than he would have admitted. Her sally failed to annoy him as much as it might at another time. Maybe she was right when she called him an old fool. Maybe he would be wiser to take the stage with her and leave this town and Burt Kane behind him. But he was a stubborn man, and he way playing for big stakes.

"Could I talk to you outside?" he asked.

He waited while she threw a shawl over her shoulders and they went out together. The night air was cool and Morrisey shivered slightly.

"Kind of gets in your bones, doesn't it?"

"There's nothing the matter with my bones," he retorted. "Anyway, I didn't ask you out to discuss the weather. What time are you leaving tomorrow?"

"Decided to come along with me?"

"No."

"Well, the stage usually leaves about ten in the morning. But what's the difference if you're not taking it?"

"I want you to do something for me before you go," Morrisey told her. "You must know just about every one of the prospectors around here. And they probably trust you."

"I guess you could say that," she agreed. "They're a pretty suspicious bunch but I always got along with them."

"Good. Here's what I want you to do . . ."

He gave her his instructions briefly, knowing that she was bewildered by

them but unwilling to explain fully. Were she to find out what he intended to do he knew that she would not agree.

"I don't know what's on your mind," she said when he was finished. "It had better be good, or there'll be a lot of ornery men waiting for you."

"Treat them to a few rounds of drinks," Morrisey suggested. "That will keep them from getting restless."

"How about me? I'm afraid you're up to something dangerous."

"Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

He patted her shoulder and said good night, wishing he were as certain of himself as his last statement indicated. Thinking back, he saw that he might have planned things differently. But it was too late now. Once he had things started he could not turn back. He would have to play the hand he held.

Morrisey was up even earlier than usual, and as soon as it was light enough to see clearly he took the trail up out of town. He moved steadily ahead, sticking to the middle of the rough road, and his black garb showed plainly against the gray rock. The two men behind him had little trouble keeping him in sight.

They were experts at their trade, keeping well behind him and using the plentiful cover to stay out of sight. Once Morrisey stopped to shake a peb-

ble from his boot and his glance strayed back along the trail. But he saw no one.

For a time he walked slowly, then as the trail faded out began to speed up his pace. He was in broken country and the pair behind him lessened the distance between them, slipping from tree to tree and skulking behind bushes. Morrisey halted several times more to peer anxiously back. His suspicions apparently allayed, he went on again.

HE PASSED the first ravine he had examined the day before and skirted around it and made for clearer ground. The two behind had to fall back as Morrisey broke into the open. They had some anxious moments then, fearing he might get too far ahead and that they might lose him.

But his hurry was not so great, and if the fact that he traversed open ground forced them to keep a long way back it also had some advantage. Always above them, Morrisey was also

The big man's gun came up too late. Morrisey's shot caught him in the chest

in clear view.

Then, as though the earth had swallowed him, the man in the black suit vanished. Swiftly, but stealthily, the two went after him, their faces tense with the thought that he might have eluded them. It was the sound of his pick against the rock which reassured them. Morrisey had stopped.

They came upon the gully, crawled flat on their bellies now. The digging had ceased as suddenly as it had begun and a look passed between the two men. They moved close together.

"He must have found something," the smaller of the two suggested. He was lean, dark, and vicious-looking. His partner, taller, heavier with a square jaw that was covered with black stubble, nodded agreement.

"Reckon so," he whispered, his mouth to the other's ear. "We better take it slow."

They crept to the edge of the gully and the smaller man removed his hat and slid forward to a point where his eyes could survey what lay below. There was nothing to be seen except the few holes Morrisey had dug the day before, and a disappointed snarl twisted thin lips. But a second later there came a sound from around the bend and the snarl vanished, to be replaced by a satisfied grin.

The lean man rejoined his partner and motioned him around the rim of the gully. Moving with infinite care and slowness they covered the last few yards and inched their way through tall grass to the jagged rim. Intently they leaned forward, let their eyes swing down. An elbow dug into the bigger man's ribs.

"Down there. Near the end," the lean one whispered.

Through the screen of bushes Morrisey's black coat was visible. He seemed to be bent in rapt contemplation of some discovery he had made, for he scarcely moved.

"Now," the small man whispered.

His partner's lips curled in between his teeth and he clamped down hard as he slid the gun out of his holster. Slowly the gun came up, was levelled by a hand as steady as a rock. Between the unwavering sight Morrisey's back made a target that could not be missed. Then the silence of the day was shattered by two shots in quick succession, and from the black cloth twin puffs of dust arose.

"Got him!" the big man said with vicious satisfaction. There was no need for silence now.

But as they scrambled to their feet they saw the black coat exactly as it had been. They froze in astonishment, and while that surprise held them in its grip Morrisey's voice came coolly from behind.

"Elevate, gentlemen."

The big man was the first to make the turn. It might have been that he thought he had a chance. His gun was still in his hand, and as he came around it swung up. Too late. Morrisey's shot caught him high in the chest and lifted him and flung him back over the rim of the gully.

"Care to try your luck?" Morrisey asked pleasantly.

The small, lean man shook his head. His hands were already high and cold sweat gathered in drops on his forehead. Small black eyes were bright with fear.

"I'd just as soon kill two bushwackers as one," Morrisey told him. It was plain he meant it. "Turn around."

The small man turned as though Morrisey's words had been wires that were attached to his legs. He moved stiffly, the fear in him making his back tremble. Morrisey stepped forward and

jerked his gun from his holster and flung it into the gully.

"Now," he said, "we are going to take a little walk. And while we walk you're going to do some talking . . ."

OUTSIDE the saloon the rail was lined with horses and mules, but not a man was in sight. Morrisey grunted with satisfaction, pushed through the batwing doors and stood for a moment, letting the chatter of voices slow and die as the men saw him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sarah Borden's figure. She had done a good job. Most of the prospectors in the district seemed to be there, a hard, unshaven crew, but Morrisey's interest was not on them. It was on Burt Kane, who with a handful of his men occupied his favorite stand at the end of the bar. Morrisey caught the widening of Kane's eyes as the swarthy man caught sight of him, and he smiled.

"Surprised to see me?" he called.

Kane wet his lips. "Why should I be?"

"Because you thought I'd be lying dead somewhere up there." Kane began a hot reply but Morrisey cut him off.

"Wait. You can do your talking when I'm finished. You expected me dead because you sent two of your men to kill me."

"You're crazy!"

"No. You're the one who's crazy. Crazy with greed. You've had a good thing here, taking money from these men with your crooked games. But you weren't satisfied."

"Get to the point!" someone shouted.

"I'm getting there. All I needed was proof that what I suspected was right. I've got that proof now. That sack of dust I laid on Kane's desk last night acted just the way I thought it would. He had to find out where I'd been digging.

"It was easy to get away with killing that assayer. It was easy to burn down Sarah Borden's place. Those two things tied together. There's a fault in the rock where Kane was digging and he had a hunch that if there was a rich vein around it would run smack through the place where Sarah lived.

"The assayer probably figured it out. And then Kane killed him so he couldn't talk. Then he set to work to get rid of Sarah. But he wasn't content. When I showed up with that dust he thought I'd struck it rich. I'd bought it from a prospector, but I let Kane think what he wanted. And this morning, when I went up the mountain, two of his men followed me. They had orders to see I didn't come back alive. Kane was going into the claim jumping business on a big scale."

An angry murmur spread through the crowd. Morrisey had known they would react this way. If he could prove what he had said about Kane there was going to be a lynching. Kane knew it too, and the knowledge showed on his face.

"Part of the proof is on my back," Morrisey went on. "Anyone behind me can see the two holes Kane's man put in my coat. If I'd been in it, instead of hanging it over some twigs, I'd be dead."

"That's no proof," Kane snarled. "You could've done that yourself. And that stuff about killing the assayer and burning down Sarah's place is hogwash."

HE TRIED to make it sound good but there was a hollowness in his voice. His men edged away from him. They might have stuck had they not been outnumbered. Against this crowd

of angry men they would have no chance.

"I figured I'd need more than my own word," Morrisey said. "So I brought back one of your own hired killers. He's outside now."

He turned as though to start for the door, and saw the light of desperation in Kane's eyes. There was no way out if Morrisey was telling the truth. Like a darting snake Kane's hand dropped to his holster.

"Look out!" Sarah Borden screamed.

Morrisey flung himself sideways, his own right hand dipping beneath his coat. Kane's shot caught him on the left shoulder and knocked him off balance, but he was shooting as he fell. Kane went back on his heels. His gun dropped, and then his knees gave way and he was pitching forward.

Morrisey had to shake his head to clear it of the pain that ran up from his shoulder. Sarah was on her knees beside him, tearing away his coat. Morrisey saw she was crying.

"It's nothing," he said. "Nothing to be worried about."

But she was worried. Somehow that gave Morrisey a happy feeling, a feeling he had not had for many years. Her hands were tender and careful on his shoulder, and if she called him an old fool she did so in a way that belied her words.

"Better hurry," he said. "I want to catch that stage to Sacramento."

"You're not going anywhere," she told him. "You are going to stay right here. What you need is someone to look after you."

"Madam . . ." Morrisey began. It was no use. That wasn't what he wanted to say. He started over and made it short.

"All right, Sarah."

THE END

INNOCENT VICTIMS

★ **By PETE BOGGS** ★

INJUSTICE is always rampant in time of war, but it has never been more so than in the long-drawn-out conflict between the whites and the redskins. The following is a true instance, where innocent victims on both sides were caused to suffer.

It started one evening in April, 1865, when one Charles Carson, a relative of the famous Kit Carson, staked his horses, and those of his party, for the night. The next morning the horses were gone. The men assumed that the Blackfeet Indians had stolen them.

A little later Carson and his men were on a drunken spree when they came across a small group of Blackfeet. They knew these particular Indians could not have been the thieves, but they decided to get revenge because their horses had been stolen. They waded into the Blackfeet, with alcoholic abandon, and took several scalps in the encounter.

A few Indians of the band managed to escape, and they fled until they reached a large group of their own tribe. They held a council of war, and decided that some white scalps, no matter whose, must be taken in retaliation. They laid their plans, and bided their time.

Their chance came one May morning. The steamer "Cutter" was anchored at the junction of the Missouri and Marias Rivers. It had brought supplies to this place, because a town was about to be established there. Men were beginning to work at the job. The particular area, however, had very few trees which could be cut for cabins, but there was a place several miles upstream where the cottonwood trees were plentiful. A group of men with several wagons set out, this morning in May, to cut timber for the homes of the future metropolis.

They arrived at the place, and dropped their rifles in the wagon beds as they started at their work. Suddenly, someone shouted "Redskins!" In desperate haste, the men grabbed their guns and attempted to make a corral of their wagons. But they were greatly outnumbered, and they had no chance. Every one of the men was killed, and the Blackfeet lifted plenty of scalps that day to avenge themselves for their own dead.

The original horse thieves, and Carson and his men, may or may not have learned of the day's tragedy which occurred because of what they had done. It was a case where innocent bystanders on both sides were punished for the deeds of others.

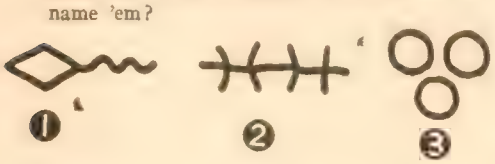
* * *

WESTERN BRAIN-MIXERS

★ By JAMES A. HINES ★

Take a crack at cow-country know-how!

1. Here are three famous cattle brands. Can you name 'em?



2. Can you name the prospector's three necessary tools to be used in prospecting?
3. Who was the founder of the wild silver-mining camp of Tombstone, Arizona? When was it founded?
4. Can you name five famous characters of Tombstone, Arizona, when it was a wild frontier town of the old West?
5. According to the old-time cowman's point of view, "free grass range," is: A range crowded with sheep? What the open range is called? The rancher who leases land from the Government? A range that has plenty of grass on it?
6. What is the best metal used to make a branding iron out of?
7. Can you name three varieties of desert cacti?
8. True or false? Brands for cattle should be seven or eight inches tall.
9. Who were the three partners in the business venture of the Tombstone mines?
10. In the days of the open range, what word was known as the cattlemen's "cuss" word?
11. Men who buy range cattle to feed will pay a premium for dehorned cattle. Why will they do this?
12. Name three of the largest mines of Tombstone, Arizona, in the days of the wild frontier.
13. The owner's brand on sheep is not burned into the hide as it is done on the hides of cattle. How is the brand put on sheep?
14. What famous mining town of the old West boasted that it had a man for breakfast every morning?
15. What man is said to have robbed stages so often that the drivers knew him by his voice?
16. What person is known as the "Daniel Boone of Arizona?"
17. Old stories have credited Bat Materson, the famous fast-shootin' Marshal of Dodge City, Kansas, as having killed twenty-seven men, but the truth is that Materson only killed how many men?
18. What famous frontier town of the old West was known as the city of "silver an' six-shooter?"
19. True or false? The first article in the unwritten book of manners of the old West was that a stranger must not be asked personal questions.
20. What is a "sluice box," an' can you describe one?

(*Answers on page* 124)

GENTLEMAN HORSE THIEF

★ By FRANCES YERXA ★

An artist, an orator, and a—horse thief! That was Otto Chenoweth—a man of parts . . .

YOUNG OTTO CHENOWETH was an artist, of good family. In 1884 he went West to paint the beautiful mountain scenery. Then he took a job as cowboy, and before long was involved with two horse thieves. He learned all the tricks of the trade, and speedily went from bad to worse. Posses chased him several times, and he engaged in several gun fights with officers of the law. In spite of the bad company he kept, and the life he led, the courtesy and fine manners he had learned as a boy in the East clung to him. He came to be known as the "Gentleman Horse Thief."

One day he was arrested. The sheriff who had taken the bad man into custody stopped at a small restaurant and took his prisoner into a back room so that they could have lunch. Chenoweth saw a chance to escape, and darted through the front room toward the door. The sheriff, gun blazing, was after him in a matter of seconds, and recaptured him just outside the door.

As the two reentered the room, where a number of men and women were lunching, Chenoweth removed his hat and proceeded to give a little speech of apology to these people for the intrusion, and the interruption of their meal. Especially did he apologize for the bad manners of the sheriff, for shooting in a dining room.

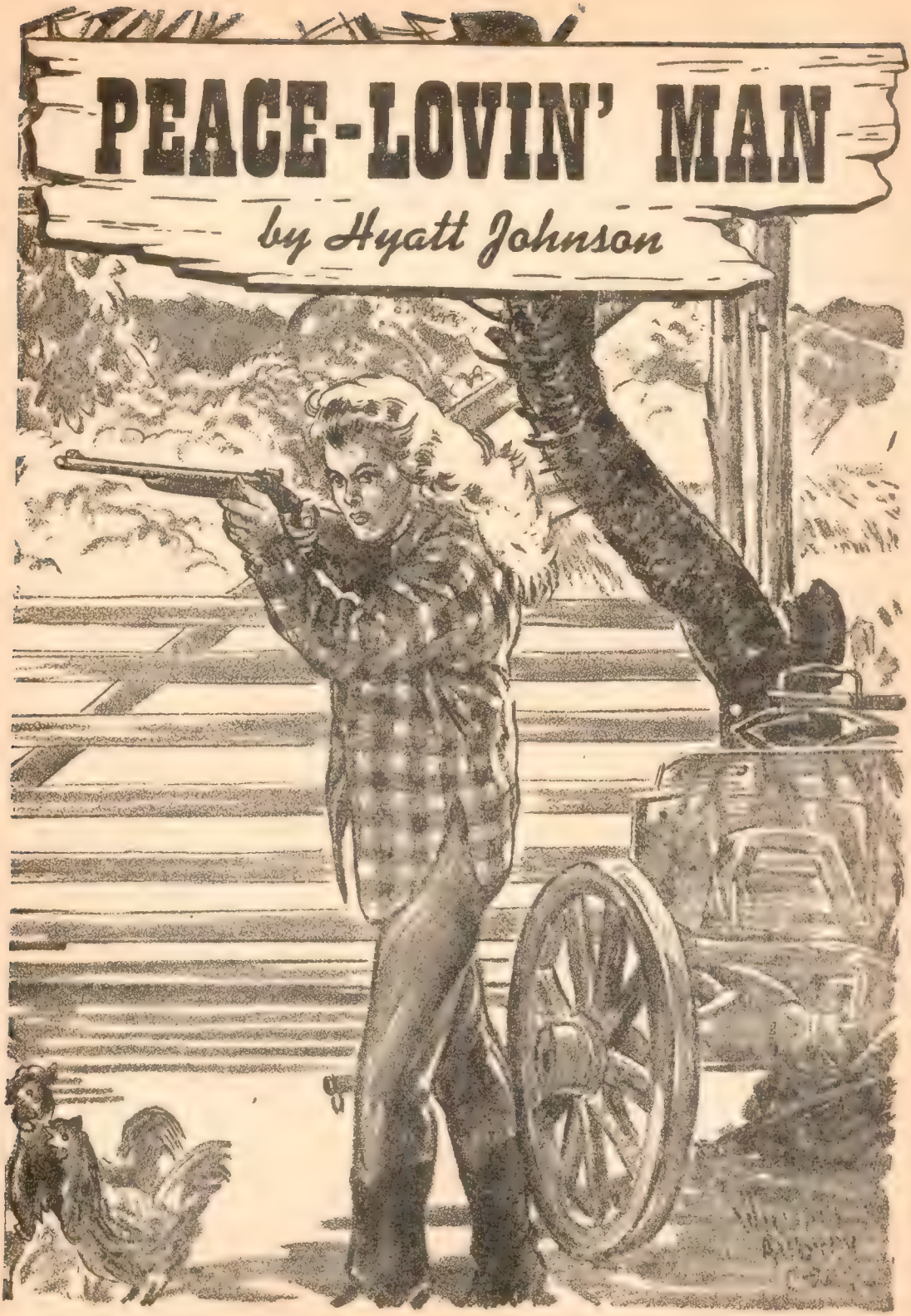
Though he was one of the most dangerous outlaws in the West, Chenoweth is known to have visited his mother occasionally in her quiet home in the East. While there he always behaved in the most circumspect and gentlemanly fashion.

The law judged Otto Chenoweth insane. His mother came for him and took him back home, where she put him in a sanitarium.

"Reach for the sky, you mangy coyote!" she said to me

PEACE-LOVIN' MAN

by Hyatt Johnson



I'M A peace loving man. I tend strictly to my own business, and I try to keep my nose out of things that are none of my concern. If people leave me alone. I don't aim to give them any worry on my account. But sometimes even a peaceful hombre like me can get himself mixed up in some kind of a ruckus if the conditions are right.

It looks like the conditions were just about right the day I rode into that little cow town. It was a hot day, and I was covered with dust from the top of my Stetson to my horse's hoofs. The watering trough set up in the middle of the main street looked mighty good to me, so I popped off my horse and started the pump going while Dunny plunged his nose into the trough and started sucking up water like he aimed to drink the thing dry. After I took a good swig from the pump and splashed my face good, I began beating the dust from my clothes and looked around. There were about three or four hombres loafing in front of the livery barn, watching my every move suspiciously.

"Mighty dry spell of weather we're having," I said, amiably.

The loafers in front of the feed store didn't answer. They just looked up and down my six-foot two like I was some kind of critter they never saw before and weren't too sure of. They were grim, and plenty suspicious. I wasn't looking for trouble, so I passed off their bad manners and headed for the saloon, where I could hear a piano tinkling. I had a thirst that it would take more than water to quench after two days in the saddle. With the reception I'd gotten from those sidewalk loafers, though, I figured it was best not to loosen my saddle just yet, and I just draped the reins over the hitching post instead of tying them. I hitched my six-gun around to where I could get ahold of it easier too, I'm a peace loving man, but I've found that it pays to take precautions once in a while.

The minute I hit the inside of the saloon, the piano left off in the middle of a tune, and it got so quiet you could almost hear the termites gnawing away at the sagging roof. I walked over to the bar, and the jingling of my spurs sounded like sleigh bells in the quiet that had come over the place. I plunked down a coin and ordered a whiskey. The bartender took the coin and poured me a drink without saying a word.

My eyes were gradually getting used to the dim light after squinting into the hot glare all day, and I looked around a little. There were four men in a card game in the back, and a couple more watching. There were two punchers standing together down at one end of the bar, the piano player at the piano, and the bartender behind the bar. About four feet to my left, at the corner of the bar stood a short, dark, slight-built man in an outfit that spelled big rancher from the fancy-stitched boots to the big, soft grey Stetson, and next to him, with a sheriff's badge pinned to his greasy vest, was one of the ugliest, toughest-looking hombres I ever saw.

He was a powerful and heavy-built man, with a nose that was broken and flattened against his face. His mouth was twisted up at one corner in a one sided grin, and his thin lips gave his mouth the look of a crooked scar. He had mean, hard looking eyes like a lobo wolf. Those eyes were staring at me, and so was every eye in the place.

I GULPED off my drink, which was pretty raw, and turned to the rancher. "Any outfits hiring around here?" I asked.

The rancher looked back at me. There was a sneering half-smile on his lips, but his eyes were stony cold.

"Might be," he said, "you driftin' through?"

"Yeh," I answered, "I was." Somehow I didn't like the tone of the rancher's voice, or the looks of the sheriff, or the feel of that whole town.

"Figuring on lightin' around here?" he asked.

"I might, if I can find me the right job."

"What's your line?" His eyes were going over me—sizing me up.

"About anything," I said. "Working cattle, breaking horses—"

"How are you with a gun?" he asked, moving closer. I could feel the men at the tables closing up to the bar, and the place was beginning to fill up with men off the street. They seemed to take an uncommon interest in strangers around that town, and I didn't like it much. I was starting to get that feeling in the belly that I always get when something is about to happen. Of course it could have been just the whiskey on an empty stomach. I hadn't eaten since the day before.

"I don't like to use a gun unless I have to," I said. "I'm a peace lovin' man." I heard one or two snickers in back of me. That was the first sound I'd heard since I'd hit the town, except for him and me talking, but it was an ugly sound, and my palms started to sweat where I was gripping the bar. I didn't dare even turn around just then, although I could feel them closing in on me, for sure now. I couldn't make out what all this was about yet.

The rancher grinned, and poured himself another drink. He set the bottle down, and suddenly looked back at me, his eyes flashing. "Stranger," he said, between his teeth, "you lie, lie like a breed injun'. The boys seen you ridin' into town on a Z-Bar horse. I reckon Liz Brodie thought she was pretty smart, sending a stranger in to spy on us, somebody we never saw before. Mighty clever sendin' you in from the other side of town so's we wouldn't get suspicious, too—but she sure slipped up when she gave you one of her own horses without even changing the brand."

I began to savvy what was up, then. It looked like I'd got myself caught right spang in the middle of a war, and caught proper too. Right then it would take just one untoward move on my part to start enough lead to line a fancy coffin flying my way.

"Mister," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, "I don't know anything about this Liz Brodie or you, or this whole ruckus. All I know is I'm driftin' through, looking for a job. As for that horse, I bought him from a Mexican three days ago in Taos."

The rancher smiled with that sneering grin I was beginning to hate. "I reckon you got a bill o' sale and everything."

"Yes I do," I said, reaching into my pocket and taking out a crumpled piece of paper. "I always conduct my business that way, I'm a peace lovin' man and—"

I moved then. The mob was watching my right hand and forgot to watch my left. As the rancher leaned forward for the slip of paper I grabbed his arm just about the elbow and yanked him off balance. As he stumbled forward I locked my left arm around his neck, while my right hand snaked towards my holster. By the time the startled mob got their guns on me they found I had their boss for a shield, gasping and choking, with his feet clear of the floor, and my six-gun leveled from under his armpit.

"I don't want any trouble," I said, backing towards the corner of the bar, where I could be sure there was nobody behind me. The mob was staring at

me stupidly, not knowing quite what to do. The sheriff's eyes were opened wide in surprise. The rancher was making strangled noises, and his face was turning red. I started edging toward the door.

"YOU gentlemen best drop those shootin' irons," I said. They just stared. I poked my gun in the rancher's ribs. "You better tell them to mind."

The rancher's face was starting to turn purple. He waved his arms feebly. "Gug-do what-ugh he says-urgh!" he managed to bleat out.

"Look here, stranger," the sheriff rasped. "We don't stand for any lawlessness in this town."

I tightened my grip on the rancher's neck. "So I see," I said, dryly. "There won't be any trouble if you just drop those guns." The sheriff saw it was no use. He let his gun fall, and the rest followed suit.

"I never like to meddle in things that are none of my business," I said. "I don't know what all this to-do is about around here, but I know I don't want to get mixed up in it. So I'll just—"

By that time I'd managed to edge my way around to the door and make sure my pony was standing where I'd left him. The rancher's face was turning blue. As I felt the batwings against my back I dropped him and dove out. He fell like a sack of wet flour, and I could hear that mob going for their guns inside as I hit Dunny's back on the fly and we lit out.

Bullets started whizzing past my head just as I rounded the corner of the livery barn, and a couple of them were mighty close. I flattened myself against Dunny's neck, praying that by the time the mob reached the corner we'd be out of effective range. I wasn't too worried about them chasing me. Dunny was tired after two days' steady traveling, but he could outrun most anything those horses had. That Mexican horse thief I bought him from stole nothing but the best.

I could hear them yelling behind me, and shooting like crazy, but most of the shots were going wild. After about fifteen minutes hard running, I slackened up to a trot, and then to an ambling walk.

The country around there was mighty good grass land, but it was pretty dried up. It was towards the end of the summer, and it had been a dry one. The dust was so thick that you could see anybody coming on horseback from miles away. I didn't see any dust cloud but my own, so I reckoned that they hadn't tried to chase me. I was safe for the time being.

With that trouble off my mind, I started noticing my stomach again. It was empty and getting fretful. I began to wonder how far I'd have to go before I could drop in on some rancher for a meal.

I got so wrapped up in thinking about food that I forgot to keep a lookout around me. The road I was traveling rounded the jutting snag of a hill, and I hadn't gone more than thirty paces past that snag before a voice spoke up sharply behind me.

"Reach for the sky, you mangy coyote," it said, "and don't make a move or I'll plug yuh!"

I stopped thinking about food in a hurry and did exactly as the voice said. It had caught me off guard, especially as, in spite of the unladylike language, the voice was a woman's!

I heard a horse coming up slowly behind me, and a hand reached over and took my gun from its holster. The voice spoke again. "If I was sure you were one of Hat Benton's men, I'd ventilate you right off. I'm not sure, but I'm not taking any chances. Turn your

"Gug-do what-ugh he says urgh!" he managed to bleat out

horse around and get back to where you came from, pronto!"

"I reckon you must be Liz Brodie," I said.

"Right," she said, "and get going. I'm feeling more like pulling the trigger every minute."

"Ma'am," I said, "I'm a peace lovin' man, and I know better than to argue with a woman, especially when she's got a gun, but I'd shore like to reason with you—because if I go back to that town I won't last a minute. I just left there trying to outrun a considerable number of bullets, and I was pretty generally given to understand I wasn't welcome."

She paused a second. "What were they after you for?" she asked.

"They thought I was one of your men."

"What made them think that?"

"Well—," I said. Then I stopped. I just remembered that the horse I was riding was supposed to be one of hers, and probably stolen. "They didn't make it quite clear why," I finished, "but since I don't seem to be wanted much around here either, I guess I'll be moving on." I turned around then, and got another surprise.

I'D EXPECTED to see some big, mannish-looking woman, about forty years old. Liz couldn't have been over twenty-five at the most, and aside from the fact that she was wearing pants and toting a mean-looking shotgun, she was far from mannish-looking. She had a small, wiry frame, strong, but curved in the right places. Her eyes were blue, cold looking right then, but I reckon they could be mighty soft and inviting, under the right circumstances. Her hair hung golden and wavy on either side of her sharp, set little face. The way her proud little chin was jutting out, I reckon she would have carried out her threat to shoot me down all right, but she sure was pretty.

I didn't want to waste any time staring right then, though, so I started off towards town, like she'd told me, but I hadn't gone more than a few paces before she called out. "Hold up there!" She had a voice that could have been mighty pleasant, but it wasn't right then.

I stopped, because she still had that shotgun pointing. "Where did you get that horse?" she asked.

Here it comes, I thought, this horse is getting me in and out of a lot of trouble today. "Lady," I said, "I bought this horse in Taos, from a Mexican. I didn't ask where he got it, I needed a horse bad."

"That's one of mine," she said.

I sighed. "That's what those hombres back in town said. That's why they figured I was one of your men, because I had this horse. I don't suppose you believe my story either."

"No, I don't!" she said. "So just start that horse moving the way I tell you to go, and don't get any ideas about making a break, either. This shotgun isn't loaded with rock salt. We'll see what the boys have to say about horse thieves."

I felt mighty foolish riding up to the Z-Bar ranchhouse with a shotgun in my back and some young slip of a girl behind the shotgun, but the grim-faced men that were hanging around the place didn't seem to see anything unusual about it.

"What yuh got there, Liz?" one of them called out.

"It might be one of Benson's gun slicks," she said, "but it's a horse thief for sure."

"If it's one of Benson's men, why didn't you plug it?" another asked, sort of surprised.

"I figured if it was a horse thief I'd

rather hang it."

An old coot with a big white handlebar mustache hitched himself off the porch and sauntered towards us, looking me over. "Well," he sighed, "I reckon we ought to give the hombre a chance to say his piece afore we string him up. If one of you gentlemen will go find a rope, I'll start the trial." He cleared his throat. "Now, defendant. If you got anything to say for yourself, speak now or forever hold your peace."

"I bought this horse three days ago from a Mexican in Taos," I began, for the third time that day, "I didn't ask—"

"Just a minute, stranger," the white haired coot broke in. "What did this Mexican look like?"

"Short, runty-looking character with a little mustache and a scar across his cheek," I said.

The old coot turned to the girl. "Liz," he said, "what about that Mexican ranch hand o' yourn that pulled stakes about three weeks ago? Sorta fitted that description, didn't he?"

"Why, come to think of it, that horse disappeared about the same time," she said, surprised. "Maybe—"

"Maybe this hombre is tellin' the truth," he finished. "It might not be quite fittin' to hang him if he is."

"I guess you're right, Cal," Liz said. "But he still might be one of Benson's men. I say send him on his way if we aren't going to hang him."

The old man looked at me, his eyes twinkling. "Maybe you're right," he said, "but he don't look like one of Benson's men. You et yet, stranger?"

"Cal!" Liz snapped. "We can't take any chances."

"From where I stand," said the old man, "he don't look too dangerous. Besides, you ain't lettin' him go off on that horse, are you?"

Liz turned red. "Not by a long shot," she said. "All right, stranger, you're welcome to light and have some grub. We'll decide what to do with you later."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said solemnly, pulling out my bandanna and mopping my forehead. "Mighty hot day, ain't it?" The whole grim-looking gathering gave a loud laugh at that.

"Reckon it was a mite hot for you there for a spell, stranger," said the old man, giving me his hand. "My name's Cal Saunders."

"Mine's Wade Moulton," I told him, "and I'm mighty pleased to meet you."

CAL laughed again. "Come on into the house," he said. "Liz'll fix you some chuck."

Liz turned toward the house. "I'll fix him something," she said with an icy voice. "But I'm warning you, Cal, keep an eye on that man!"

Cal winked at me, "I'm the only man who dares talk to that little hellion around here," he said, "and that's only because I used to tan her backside for her when she was a young'un."

Liz really fixed me up a meal! I swear she made the best biscuits and apple pie I ever tasted, and I sure lit into it. She still looked plenty mad, and didn't say anything while she was setting out the food in front of me, but Cal Saunders sat across the table talking a blue streak. What he had to say was mighty interesting.

"First off, I better tell you that all of us are outlaws," he said, "That 'Sheriff' of Hat Benson's swears he'll hang every one of us. 'lessen we 'quit resistin' the law' as he calls it."

From what Cal said, it seems that Hat Benson owned the big Crossbow spread, which was the original cow outfit in that country. Hat Benson was king of the range, and mighty resentful of the smaller outfits that began moving in. He tried to buy them out, but they

wouldn't buy. He tried to scare them out, but they wouldn't scare. The smaller ranchers figured they had just as much right to the range as he did. Hat Benson bided his time, and when the time came, he moved.

That year there was a dry spell. Springs that usually lasted out the year dried up by the middle of July, and water got mighty scarce. About the same time a bunch of hard cases started drifting and taking jobs at the Crossbow. They took to drinking in the town, and fighting and gunplay got pretty frequent. Folks started complaining about the sheriff.

"The sheriff was old Ben Brodie!" Cal's eyes lit up when he talked about Old Ben. "We was sidekicks from back in the old injun fightin' days, and a better man never lived than old Ben Brodie. Had plenty o' guts and plenty o' brains. Hat Benson tried to run him but he couldn't—so old Ben got shot trying to stop a jail break. Hat Benson picked one of his own men to take Ben's place, a no-good skunk named Grip, and that's the 'law' we got in this county now.

"Hat Benson had everything his own way after Ben was gone. First thing he did was announce that he had the rights to all the springs and water holes on the range, and he had his sheriff to back him up. Said the small ranchers couldn't water their stock at 'his' springs.

"Well, us ranchers got hoppin' mad when we heard that. We met here at the Z-Bar, and when we was all together, Liz got up and started talkin'." Cal looked around to see if Liz was in the room. "You saw how Liz is. She took it plenty hard when old Ben got killed. He'd raised her up all by hisself since her mother died when she was still a baby. She was taking it hard, but she wasn't taking it lying down. She was too much like her old man for that. She got up and told those ranchers that they couldn't do nothing but fight. Told them there was no law left, so they'd have to take the law in their own hands. Said any man who wouldn't stand up for his own rights was a yellow-livered coward. Oh, she had them fightin' mad all right!

"From then on, it's been war. The 'sheriff' swore in deputies and tried to stop us from usin' the springs. We shot 'em. Sheriff swore out warrants for our arrest, and we ambushed the posse that was tryin' to serve 'em. So far we've held him off all right, but I don't know how much longer we can keep it up."

"How about the territorial governor?" I asked, "It don't seem like he'd allow this sort of goings on."

CAL told me in strong words what he thought of the territorial governor, and where he could go. "We appealed to him all right," he said, "but he said he 'couldn't spare the troops right then'. Been trouble with the Indians up north. Said he'd tend to it soon as he could. Wade, we're outnumbered and we can't hold out much longer, with the men we've got." Cal leaned back in his chair and pulled at his mustache. "I didn't save your hide just now just because I took a shine to you. I figgered you looked like a man we could use, figgered you looked like a man who could fight. You wouldn't be lookin' for a job, would you?"

"Cal," I said, "I'm mighty sympathetic with you and what you're up against, but I don't like to get mixed up in these ruckuses that are none of my concern. I'm a peace-lovin' man, and I reckon I'll be driftin' on to someplace just a little more peaceful."

Cal shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, "but I reckon you'll have to drift

afoot, because you ain't got a horse any more. I don't want to force nothin' on you but—"

"He can take a horse and get out!" Liz had come up behind us before we heard her, "I've got no use for lily-livered skunks. Get out!"

"Ma'am," I said. "I just don't want to get mixed up in something that's none of my business, that's all."

Liz looked like she was going to throw something. I don't know what she would have done if it hadn't been that a horseman came whooping in to the ranch like the devil was on his tail. Everybody ran out to meet him as he jumped off his horse and headed towards us. "They're comin'!" he yelled, all out of breath, "The hull pack of 'em. Looks like about fifty or sixty men."

"Well, stranger," Liz snapped, "Now is your chance. Are you leaving or—" A bullet thunked into the wall about a foot from my head. We both dove for the door and into the house.

"Ma'am," I sighed, "Hand me a gun. As long as I'm going to be here a while, I may as well make myself useful."

The posse had come up on the house and surrounded it before we had a chance to do much but take cover. For about a half hour the shooting was heavy, then it slacked off to scattered popping. It looked like we were in for a siege. From somewhere a rifleman was pumping shells steadily through the windows. It began to get on my nerves.

I crawled over to one of the windows and looked out carefully. Ping! A slug bored through the casement and bedded itself in the wall. Close call, but it was what I'd been looking for. I found where the bullet had hit the wall, and sighted from there back through the hole in the window. It was like sighting down that rifle from the wrong end, and it showed me about where that sharpshooter was hiding. I only took a quick look, because I wasn't aiming to wait for him to put another bullet in the same place, but it was enough.

He was behind a rock on the hill looking down on the ranchhouse. Fixed in pretty good, but he had to raise his head above the rock every time he shot. I watched, and saw him raise up, shoot, and duck down again. The second time his head popped up in the same place, and another bullet whistled through the window. I drew a bead on the spot and waited. His hat poked up, and then his head and shoulders. He took aim, and I squeezed the trigger. His head snapped back, and he fell sideways from behind the rock.

"Did you get him?" Liz spoke up from behind me.

"He was bothering me," I said, "Have you figured out what we're going to do when the ammunition runs out?"

"That won't be for a long time," she said. "Keep up that shooting and maybe we won't have to worry."

I grinned. "Why Liz," I said, "that's the first kind word you've given me all day."

"I admire a man who can shoot straight," she said coldly, "even if that's *all* he can do."

THAT shut me up, all right. I had to kind of admire that girl. She was pretty, and had plenty of gumption, but I hated to think of being married to a girl like that. I'm a peace-loving man, and I like my women more tractable.

The way I figured it, Benson wouldn't be satisfied just to sit tight and wait till he starved us out. He had to work fast, wipe us out before the stink of what was going on in that county got too far. I was right. About the time it got dark a volley of shots

started spattering against the front of the house, and I could hear the gun slicks outside whooping it up.

"They're rushing us," Liz yelled. In the darkness outside I could make out a mob of men charging for the house, flames spouting from the muzzles of their guns. Then we were all at the windows, firing back. The rancher next to me was shooting, cussing between each shot.

"The dam—Bang! Sneakin' low down—Bang! Dirty sons of—" His gun fell from his hand and he pitched forward across the window sill. I hardly noticed him fall, I was so busy shooting at the shadowy mob outside. I got one, missed another. A bullet slammed through the crown of my hat, missing my head by about two hairs. My gun clicked empty, and I dropped on one knee to reload. Then suddenly the shooting outside died away.

Liz had a big powder smudge across her cheek. She was yelling "We've stopped them, we've driven them off!"

Cal Saunders stared out the window with a blank look on his face. "Dammit," he said, "We didn't beat them off—they just all of a sudden quit! There's something mighty funny here."

There was. Everybody was laughing and joking for about two minutes, thinking we'd won the scrap, and then we found out what had happened. One of the ranchers suddenly stopped grinning and sniffed. "I smell smoke," he said.

"Look!" another one yelled, pointing.

There was a door leading to the back of the house and from under the door a wisp of smoke was curling upwards. Cal kicked the door open and a puff of yellow smoke hit him in the face. Inside the room you could see the flames spreading. Cal slammed the door.

"Well boys," he said quietly. "Now we know why those skunks turned and ran. They was just keeping us busy in front while somebody sneaked around to the back and set the roof afire."

"Gawdamighty!" said one of the ranchers. "We're trapped for sure!"

"We'll all be roasted alive!" said another in an awed voice.

Liz's voice sang out hard and sharp. "We've got to make a break for it. That's our only chance!"

That didn't sound too good. The gunmen outside were gleefully pouring lead into the burning ranchhouse now.

"We ain't got a chance that way neither," a ranchman whined. "They'd cut us down afore we got ten feet."

"They won't if we go out the back," Liz said. "They aren't expecting us out that way."

"How in thunder are we going to get out the back? The hull place is in flames!"

"THIS place has a cellar," said Liz, kicking aside a rug and lifting a trap door. "It's got another opening out back. Paw used to hide men who were on the dodge from the law down there before he became sheriff. Go out two at a time. We'll keep firing out the front to cover till everybody gets out. Maybe we got a chance that way. Jake, you and Hank Spears go first." She gave the men their orders, turning to me last. "Wade, will you stick it out with me till everybody's out?"

"Sure," I said, wondering how I was fool enough to agree to such a thing.

"Hold on there," said Cal Saunders. "You can't go out last, Liz."

"I'm running this shindig." Liz yelled angrily, "I told you your order, and you're sticking to it or I put a bullet through you. Soon as you get out, break for the hills. We'll meet at the head of rocky pass. They don't have us licked yet!"

I drew a bead on him and waited. When his head showed, I fired

The room was filling with smoke, and we could hear the fire crackling hard. The whole place would be a barbecue pit with us for the spareribs before long. "Hank and Jake get going," Liz yelled, "The rest of you start firing out front."

There was no time for argument, the men did what she told them. Two by two, as Liz tapped them, they moved down through the trap door. I was running from window to window, firing like I was six or seven men, trying to keep the men outside from figuring out that there was less and less of us inside. The roof above us was burning now, and the smoke was stinging my eyes. I was gasping and choking, wondering if we would get out before the roof fell in. As near as I could see they hadn't noticed the men slipping out the back yet.

"Come on, Wade," Liz yelled finally. "They're all out but us." I saw her dimly through the smoke going down through the trap. The whole roof looked like it was just about to come crashing down, and burning chunks of it were falling all around me. I fought my way through the smoke and dropped to the cellar just as a beam crashed down.

"We cut that a mite fine," I said, "Where do we go now?"

"This way." There was an opening a little way down a narrow passage. She took my hand. "Here's hoping we make it. If they see us we keep running, even if one of us falls. Let's go!"

Then we were out of the opening and running for the hills. Behind us the sky was lit up from the blazing house. Suddenly Liz stumbled and fell. I stopped.

"You all right?" I whispered.

"My ankle," she said. "Keep running, you fool."

From the front of the house I could hear Hat Benson's voice. "Come out with your hands up," he was bawling. "We got you trapped." I scooped up Liz and ran.

"There they go!" somebody yelled behind us. "They're running out the back!" Bullets kicked up dust around my feet.

"Drop me," Liz screamed, "you can't run carrying me!"

"Hold still!" I said. We were away from the firelight and into the darkness now. We still had a slim chance of getting away. Then I heard horses coming up behind us, and a voice yelled.

"There they are!"

I dropped Liz and turned, shooting. The horsemen were silhouetted against the fire and made a good target. My first bullet lifted one from the saddle, and then they were firing from all around us. Before I had time even to duck, a bullet ploughed a furrow across my scalp and I dropped, out cold.

WHEN I came to there was a mob of Benson's men around us. Liz was screaming, "Go ahead and shoot me, you cowards! Why don't you shoot?"

"Easy there, Liz," Benson's voice spoke up. "I reckon we can use you alive for a while. Who's this hombre?" Somebody turned me over with the toe of his boot.

"Hey, Boss, it's that saddle tramp that got the drop on us in the saloon!"

Benson cursed. "I swore I'd get that hombre personally. Is he dead?"

"Looks like."

"Naw he ain't. I saw him move."

Somebody kicked me hard in the ribs. "Get up, you!" It was Benson's voice again, full of hatred. I got up and found myself staring into that sneering face. A fist slammed into my mouth, and I went down. "Get up!" he said.

I stayed where I was. A boot kicked me in the side of the head and then another. The whole world was one big wave of pain. I went out again.

I woke up lying on a dirt floor. My head felt like it was loose from my neck and every muscle in my body hurt. I groaned, "Ain't I dead yet?"

"Wade!" Liz whispered.

I opened my eyes. Liz was bending over me anxiously. We were in a small adobe shack with bars across the little high window. "I thought I was buzzard meat for sure that time," I said. "Where are we?"

"We're in the jail in town. I don't know why Benson didn't shoot us right off, unless he wanted the pleasure of hanging us," Liz said bitterly.

I sat up. My hair was matted with clotted blood from where that bullet had creased my skull, my lip was split, and my head was battered up pretty bad from where Benson had kicked me. On top of that I was a prisoner with a good chance of being shot, hung, or burned at the stake before the day was out. All this happening to me, a peace-loving man who always did his best to avoid trouble! I was beginning to think life was against me.

"Whatever reason Hat Benson had for keeping us alive, it must have been a good one," I said. "He's not the kind of man that does that sort of thing for no reason at all."

"I know he doesn't," Liz said. "And I'm scared Wade, scared clean through." She looked like she was going to cry. "He's up to something awful, and I don't know what it is."

I took her in my arms. She wasn't the gun-toting hellion that I'd known before, she was just a girl, little more than a kid, and scared. "We aren't dead yet," I said, "and while we're still alive and kicking there's hope. We may get out of this yet."

Her soft head was resting against my chest. "I know," she said, "I reckon I'm just a little lily-livered coward for carrying on that way, but it's so awful just waiting here, not knowing what's going to happen."

A key was rattling in the lock. "I reckon we'll know pretty soon now," I said.

THE door opened and Hat Benson and his hard-eyed sheriff stepped into the little jail. They had their guns drawn, not taking any chances this time.

"Well, how do my guests find the accommodations," Benson sneered, "I trust you're enjoying your stay."

"We're doing fine, no thanks to you, Hat Benson." Liz was her old self again, standing right up to Benson, her chin jutting out, defiant.

Benson smiled. "Now Liz, that's no way to talk! Especially since I come in here just to do you a little favor."

"I don't look for no favors from you, you skunk!"

"Well, I'm going to do you one just the same. I'm going to let you write a letter to your men, telling them to come and get you out. In fact, I'll dictate it myself, telling them just how to do it."

Liz's eyes narrowed. "So that's why you didn't shoot me right off. You wanted to use me for bait to trap the rest of the ranchers. Well, I'm not going to write any such letter and you know damn well I'm not."

"Do I?" Benson's voice was silky, "Well, maybe I'm wrong, but I'm going to work real hard to convince you to change your mind."

The sheriff gave a nasty laugh. "We got some nice little ways of convincing people to change their mind, too. For instance, we might try holding your feet over a fire for awhile. The Injuns used to find that mighty convincing."

Liz paled, but her chin still jutted out. "You're wasting your time, Benson," she said. "I won't write that letter and there's nothing you can do to make me."

I'd kept quiet as long as I could. "Look here, you mangy packrat—"

Benson turned to me. "Oh yeh," he said, "I still got a score to settle with you. I haven't forgotten what you did to me in the saloon."

There was a knock at the door. "Boss," an excited voice called through the panel. "I gotta see you right away. It's important, mighty important."

Benson looked annoyed. "Come on," he said to the sheriff, "I reckon we got plenty of time to finish this here. Think over what I was saying, Liz." The two of them went out the door. I heard the key turn.

I moved over by the door. They were right outside. The hombre who had knocked was talking, and he was mighty excited. I put my ear to a crack and listened.

"—The column of soldiers were headed right this way. They stopped with me for a parley. Their Captain said he was passin' through this way and had orders to stop and look to the rumors they'd heard about trouble in this county. Said he was supposed to try and straighten it out. I ducked around the other side of a hill, soon as I left him, and high-tailed it for town so's I could get here in time to warn yuh, Boss. They'll be here in about fifteen minutes. What do you reckon we'd better do?"

"Do?" Benson laughed. "Why I reckon we'll just make the soldiers welcome."

"Are you loco, Benson," the sheriff cut in, "What are we going to do if they find out what's been going on around here?"

"How are they going to find out?" Benson said. "You're the law in this county, aren't you?"

"Yeh, but—"

"You haven't noticed any trouble around here, have you?"

"I begin to see what you mean, Boss," the sheriff said after a pause. "He'd have to take my word for it, all right, with those ranchers still hiding in the hills, but I'm just a mite queezy about talkin' to the army. You see—well, never mind. Let's go convince the soldiers what a peaceful little town we have here." They walked off, laughing.

LIZ had been crowding up behind me, jumping up and down with impatience. "What are they saying out there, Wade?" she asked. I told her and she moaned. "Wade! You mean to say the soldiers are coming, and Benson's going to keep them moving right on through?"

"That's what he claims."

"We gotta get to them, we gotta let them know!" she cried, "Oh Wade, we've got to get out of here!" She began beating on the door with her fists.

"Take it easy, Liz."

"Oh Wade!" she sobbed, "Do something, think of something."

I heard the key rattle, and one of Benson's men came in. He shut the door and leaned back against it, thumbing back the hammer on his six-gun. "I'm here to see that you don't make any fuss while the army's in town," he said lazily, "Boss said he don't want nothin' to disturb the soldiers. Don't want to hear a sound out of you till they leave. Get back against that wall and stand there."

Liz looked at me, her eyes still begging me to do something. I didn't see anything I could do. The guard was leaning back against the door, his

gun held steady. His face didn't show any expression at all, and his eyes never blinked. He would be a tough one to catch off guard.

We heard the sound of the cavalry troop coming down the road, and passing right by the jailhouse. We heard them halt, up the street a ways and heard the order to dismount. Then there was the sound of troopers talking and laughing. After about an hour we heard the soldiers getting in formation again, and the orders given to mount and march. Benson's voice carried above the rest of the noise. "Well, thanks for the visit, Captain. Right nice of you to drop around and take such an interest in our little town. Sorry it was just a wild goose chase."

Liz threw me a look of dispair. It felt pretty bad to hear help pass us right by, and not be able to do anything about it. I hadn't been standing there doing nothing all this time, though. I'd been sizing up the guard, figuring how to get around him. I couldn't do anything standing this far from him, and he wasn't letting me get any closer. Somehow I had to get nearer to him, and to do it pretty quick too. Benson would be back before long.

I groaned, and fell flat on my face on the floor. "Wade," Liz called out, "What's the matter?"

"Shut up!" the guard barked, "an' don't move. Leave him lay there!" He hadn't moved from his position against the door, like I'd hoped he would, but falling that way had put me about half way across the room, which wasn't more than twelve feet wide.

"I'm all right," I said in a feeble voice, "reckon I just kind of fainted. This crease in my skull's bothering me some." I brought my hands up under my chest as though I was fixing to get up, and as I did I scooped some dirt from the dirt floor. I brought my knees up under me like I was struggling to raise myself. That put me just close enough to the guard.

SUDDENLY my hand whipped up, and a handful of dust hit the guard square in the eyes. The guard's six-gun roared, and the bullet slammed past my ear as I lunged out of the way. Before he could fire again, my left arm came up under his gun hand and my right locked around his elbow. I threw my weight behind it and twisted. He yelled, and the gun fell to the floor. His knee came up, just missing my groin. I smashed my fist into his face, and he stumbled back across the room. I grabbed the gun off the floor and covered him.

Footsteps were pounding up outside. "What happened in there, Joe?" somebody yelled.

"Tell him I tried to make a break and you shot me," I hissed. He looked at me, dazed. "Tell him quick, or I'll plug you."

"The hombre tried to make a break. I had to plug him," the guard called out. He didn't make it sound convincing. "You all right, Joe?" one of the men outside said anxiously. I nodded.

"Yeh, I'm fine," the guard called back. That was all I had to have from the guard. I smashed him across the side of the head with the butt of my gun. He wasn't any more trouble.

"Wade, you got to get to the soldiers," Liz whispered.

"I'm going to try," I said, "stand away from the door."

They were unlocking the door, coming in to see what had happened. I waited, ready. The door swung open and my gun spoke. The man in the doorway dropped and I lunged out shooting. There were two other men, outside, and I dropped them both before they could shoot. A horse was

tied a little way up the street. I made for him.

Someone was shouting behind me. I jerked the reins loose from the post and leaped on the horse's back. They were shooting at me now, and more men were pouring out of the building, as the alarm went round. I headed out of town running a gauntlet of bullets. A slug slammed into my shoulder, and I could feel blood trickling down inside my shirt. Another smashed into my leg. I crouched down over the saddle horn, locked my arms around the horse's neck, gritted my teeth and hung on. I made it.

I caught up with the soldiers about two miles from town. Their leader wheeled his horse around and watched me riding up. I let out a joyful curse. I knew that man!

"Captain Colburn," I yelled, pulling up.

He looked blank for a few seconds, then he saw who it was. "Well, I'll be damned!" he roared, "Sergeant Moulton! What in blazes are you doing around here? Man, you look like you've been through Hell! I thought you swore you were going to settle down to a peaceful life when you left the army, and quit getting into trouble. Hey! You're wounded!"

"I'm all right," I said. "There isn't too much time. I've got to tell you what's happened around here."

When I got through with the story, he cursed softly. "I thought there was something wrong back there in town," he said, "but I had orders not to interfere with the civil authorities unless the situation seemed to warrant it. That sheriff—"

"Beggin' your pardon, Captain," a soldier spoke up, "You remember me sayin' I thought I knew that sheriff? Well I just remembered who he is. He's a man used to be in my old outfit. Got mixed up in some Injun graft and went over the hill before they could catch him."

"Turn the troop around," the Captain roared, "We're going back."

THINGS were getting hazy and blurred. I tried to talk, but the words would hardly come. "I gotta go back with you. Liz—Liz is in there. I gotta . . ." everything was getting dark.

"Catch him, he's falling!" I heard the Captain yell. That's all I remember.

When I opened my eyes I was lying in a bed somewhere, and sunlight was streaming in the window. It was peaceful and quiet, just the way I'd always wanted it to be. I sighed.

"Cal!" I heard Liz's voice calling. "Cal, he's awake!" Liz was bending over me, looking happy. She was wearing a dress now, and her hair was fluffed up round her head like a halo. She looked like an angel.

Then I remembered what had happened, and tried to raise up. "Liz!" I said, "Hat Benson, what—"

She pushed me down again, gently. "Lie still," she said, "you've lost a lot of blood. Everything's all right. The soldiers got both Hat Benson and his sheriff, and they're taking them back to the fort for trial, Benson's gun slicks have all cleared out and—" She threw herself on me and buried her head in my chest, sobbing. "Oh Wade! I didn't know whether you were going to pull through or not. I thought for a while that I was going to lose you!"

"Shucks!" I heard Cal mutter, "You couldn't lose that hombre, he's just too tough to die!" The door closed quietly behind him as he left the room.

Yes sir, I'm a peace lovin' man, always have been and always will be. They elected me sheriff of one of the

most peace lovin' counties in the territories. It has to be peaceful because I sure raise Hell if it isn't. Me and Liz are going to see that our kids grow up in a country where trouble isn't likely to overtake a peace lovin' man.

SITTING BULL'S INAUGURATION

★ By MILDRED MURDOCH ★

Not even a presidential inauguration was as formal as Sitting Bull's!

THE installation of a new Indian chief was always an occasion of great ceremony and celebration. The inauguration of the Sioux chief, Sitting Bull, was an especially important event, for his election as head chief consolidated a number of bands under one leader, in preparation for the defense of their land from the white man. It was 1857, and the Indians as a whole were trying to get along with the encroaching whites, but becoming ever more nervous and fearful as to what this advancing tide of foreigners would mean to them.

The Indians were camped along a river. A big council lodge was erected for the preliminary ceremonies. A huge framework of poles was set up, over which were stretched several ordinary size tepee covers. Sitting Bull was in his own lodge, dressed in the plainest of clothing, humbly wearing only two eagle feathers. Four chiefs went to him and led him outside. They seated him upon a buffalo robe, then each holding a corner, carried him to the council lodge, where were gathered the important men of the tribes.

With Sitting Bull seated in the place of honor, the inauguration began with the smoking of a pipe of communion. Each act of the ceremony had significance and import. The mouthpiece of the pipe was extended toward the ground, signifying their wish to be strong and steadfast; then to each of the four directions, that no ill winds might bring distress to them; then to the sun, that their way might be bright so that they could avoid danger. The pipe was passed around the circle slowly, from right to left, as the sun passes. As each Indian puffed upon the pipe, he breathed a prayer to God, or Wakan Tanka. As they prayed, using the pipe, so Sitting Bull was to pray for his people. The pipe was then presented to him as a badge of his high office.

Then there were many speeches and songs. The qualities of the new chief, and his fitness for the office, were extolled. He was a man of the people, never arrogant, except to the whites, but merciful and generous, and his bravery had been proven many times. His new duties were explained: first, he was to think of Wakan Tanka, and second, he was to care for his people, especially the poor. He was told that he must study the eagle, which is the chief of all birds, its feathers being the rewards of valor.

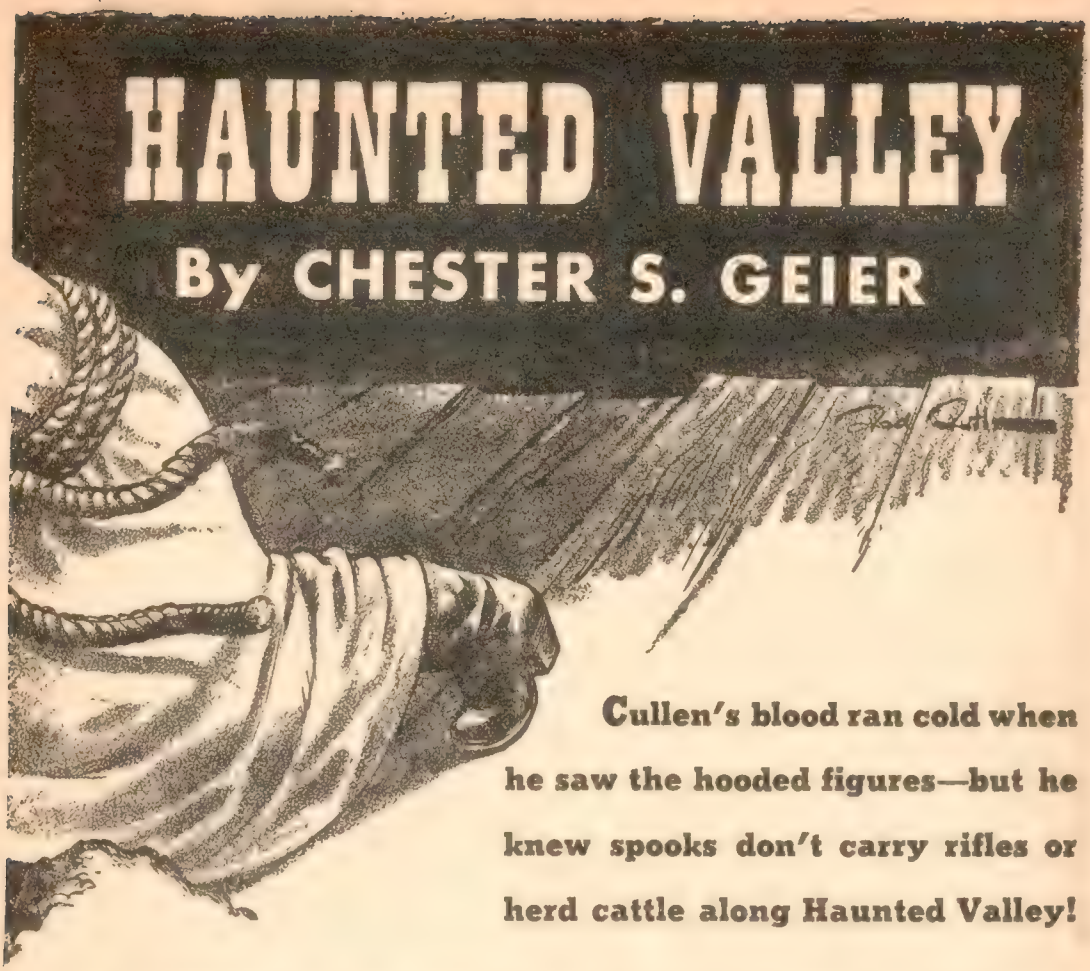
Next they brought to Sitting Bull a magnificent headgear, and with it he was publicly crowned. It had a beaded head band, pendants of ermine, a crown of black and white eagle feathers, and a double tail of eagle feathers which cascaded down the back till it dragged upon the ground. Every part of that war-bonnet was symbolical of some brave deed accomplished by one of the Indians in the tribes here being drawn together under one chief.

Then Sitting Bull was led from the lodge, and presented with a fine white horse. He was lifted into the saddle by two of the chiefs. As he rode off slowly, behind him all the warriors formed into a column. Dressed in their finest, with eagle feathers waving, sacred and symbolic devices of all kinds displayed, their best horses decorated for the occasion, the Indians rode in cavalcade about the huge camp. The pomp and pageantry and warlike spirit of the day was completed by the chanting of a virile song of hope and pride. To these warriors, theirs was the greatest nation in the world, and they were its flower. To Sitting Bull, elected chieftain of this mighty horde, it was a proud and humbling and heart-filling day.

The hooded figure stepped up behind him and raised the board

HAUNTED VALLEY

By CHESTER S. GEIER



Cullen's blood ran cold when he saw the hooded figures—but he knew spooks don't carry rifles or herd cattle along Haunted Valley!

MOONLIGHT was flooding the land with silver radiance when Cullen reached the end of the pass and saw the valley spread out before him. Reining his big gelding to a stop, he reached into his leather jacket for makings and began to roll a cigarette. He studied his surroundings as he did so, his blue eyes thoughtful under the brim of his flat-crowned, black Stetson.

There was danger of some sort connected with this place. He knew that much, thought Pete Jonker hadn't explained just what the danger was. But Cullen felt certain it was serious. He knew Pete Jonker wasn't the kind to exaggerate.

The cigarette lighted, Cullen blew a long plume of smoke and ran a thumbnail over the crispness of the folded envelope in the pocket of his flannel shirt. The envelope contained the letter from Pete Jonker that had brought him to this forsaken corner of Nevada —that, and an assayer's report. For in addition to the letter Pete Jonker had sent a specimen of silver ore, requesting Cullen to have it analyzed.

"I could have it done by an assayer in town," Jonker had written. "But that way the news would get out, and hell would bust loose. So you have the assay made for me, Bret, and bring the report with you in person. I'm counting on you. This thing is plenty big, and I'll need your help. There may be serious trouble in Hunted Valley.

Strange things have been happening here already. I'll tell you about it when I see you, Bret."

Cullen had lost no time in having the specimen assayed and setting out for the Hook J ranch. He and Jonker had been firm friends ever since they became acquainted in the Texas Rangers. Then Jonker's father had died, and Jonker had left to take over the management of the Hook J. Not long after Cullen had left also, taking a job as investigator for the Cattleman's Association. He had been due for a vacation when Jonker's letter had reached him.

Looking at Haunted Valley now, Cullen wondered about the strange things Jonker had mentioned happening. How did the silver ore specimen tie in? According to the assayer's report, the specimen contained 82% silver. That seemed an unusually large amount even to Cullen, who had little experience with ore gradings.

Steep hills enclosed the valley, looming black and sharp against the dark sky. A considerable distance to the left of where Cullen sat his horse was a sprawling mass of wooden buildings, looking pale and ethereal in the moonlight. They were the deserted remains of Bullion City, Cullen knew from what Jonker had told him of the locality. A ghost town now, Bullion City had once been a prosperous and bustling mining center.

There was something eerie and vaguely menacing about the town. Men had died here, Cullen knew, died in gunfights brought on by whiskey or cards. But even more numerous must have been those who had perished in the dark, alone and unseen, going down under the blow of a club or the thrust of a knife. Bullion City had had its full share of thieves and murderers, attracted by the lure of easy money. Its Boothill must have been filled to overflowing.

Cullen recalled the tales he had heard about the spirits of those who had died violently remaining to haunt the scenes of their passing. The appearance of Bullion City in the moonlight made him wonder. It was easy to imagine that the shades of the departed hovered among the gray and spectral buildings. And for a moment Cullen thought he did see a number of misty white shapes far down a shadowy street.

HE FOUGHT down a shudder and grinned wryly. Looking at the town too long made one see things that couldn't possibly be there. He now understood how Haunted Valley had got its name.

He drew at his cigarette again and glanced toward the right end of the valley. After a moment he made out the huddled forms of a herd of cattle, evidently bedded down there for the night. At the farther end of the herd a number of animals moved restlessly, and for the first time Cullen saw that a small campfire was burning. A couple of punchers were apparently on guard duty over the herd. They would be Hook J men, since Cullen had been told that a large part of the valley was included among Hook J land.

Tossing away the stub of his cigarette, Cullen tugged his horse into motion. According to Jonker's descriptions in the past, there was another pass at the opposite end of the valley. This gave into the Hook J proper, and from there he would be able to see the ranch buildings. It was growing late, and Cullen was weary from long hours in the saddle. He thought eagerly of hot food, a comfortable chair, and of a long talk with Jonker. It would be good to see the other again.

The gelding trotted across the silver-bathed valley floor, its hoofs muted by

the deep grass. A foreboding silence seemed to enclose the sounds it made. Cullen found himself glancing about with uneasy watchfulness. Something about the valley got under his skin with a feeling of clammy chill. He knew it wasn't due entirely to the weird tales Jonker had told of the place. There was something ominous about the valley—something that seemed to hover about it like a dread miasma.

It was with a sensation closely bordering on relief that Cullen presently made out the shadow-filled pocket of the pass. He guided the gelding into it—then jerked at the reins as his senses detected an abrupt new quality in the air, a stir of motion that seemed more feeling than actual sound.

Hand flashing to the bone-handled Colt on his hip, Cullen whirled in the saddle to peer back across the valley floor. He saw something that brought a grimace of amazement to his spare, sun-bronzed face and sent prickles of cold racing down his back.

From the direction of the ghost town a group of several mounted figures came racing amid a weird soundlessness that had all the unreality of a nightmare. They were small with distance, but Cullen's staring eyes could see that they were white, all white, the horses and the indistinct shapes atop them. Ghost riders astride ghost horses swooping with uncanny quiet over the ground!

There was an air of grimly deliberate purpose about the swiftly moving apparitions. Cullen realized that they were plummeting directly toward the herd of cattle at the other side of the valley. As they neared the herd sounds abruptly came from the wrath-like figures, blood-curdling shrieks and moans that rose and fell and rose again in a melody of stark madness.

The herd had started to its feet and was beginning to move about in growing panic. The frightened lowing of cattle was added to the ululating wails of the oncoming spectres. The punchers on guard duty were dimly visible beyond the milling herd, scrambling frantically toward their mounts. One had paused long enough to empty his rifle at the charging ghost riders. But the only effect of the shots seemed to be that of striking new fear into the cattle. The herd broke wildly, part fleeing toward the nearest end of the valley and the others thundering in the opposite direction, past the shrieking white shapes.

FOR a long moment there was only turbulent, confused motion, without plan or purpose. Then the spectres coalesced into a group once more and swept toward the opposite pass. They vanished into it, leaving pandemonium behind them.

Cullen was deeply reflective when finally he roused his mount into motion again. Phantom riders, striking from out of the depths of a crumbling ghost town! It seemed insane, utter nonsense—yet he could not deny what he had seen. Was this, then, the danger that Jonker had hinted?

Emerging from the pass, Cullen saw the moon-etched buildings of the Hook J in the distance. Lights glowed behind the windows of the ranch house and the bunkhouse, nearby. They had a cheerful warmth of which Cullen felt very much in need after both his long trip and what he had just witnessed.

He rode directly to the ranch house, dismounting at the steps. Using his hat to beat the dust of travel out of his clothes and wiping his face with the ends of his neck scarf, he went up to the door. It opened to his knock, and he found himself gazing into the features of a girl. He was startled until

he recalled that Jonker had mentioned having a sister named Vera. The last Cullen had heard of her, she had been attending a school somewhere in the East.

For a reason which was a mystery to Cullen, the girl was startled, too. She held one slender hand to her throat, and her eyes were wide and her lips parted in an expression of eager expectancy. Then the expression faded. She took her lower lip between small, even teeth as though fighting down a surge of disappointment.

"Why, I . . . I thought you were. . . ." Her voice faltered.

"My name is Bret Cullen, ma'm," Cullen explained to fill in the gap. "I'm an old friend of Pete Jonker—your brother, unless I'm wrong. Pete's sort of expecting me."

"Oh . . . I see." The girl slowly nodded her wheat-blonde head, made golden in the light from the room beyond. "Yes, I'm Vera Jonker. Won't you come in?"

She opened the door wider and stepped back, and Cullen strode past her, puzzled and tense. Something was wrong, all right—plenty wrong!

Cullen stopped short as he saw the figure of a man standing before the fireplace in the ranch house living room. For an instant he thought the other was Pete Jonker, then he saw his mistake. The man had crisp-curling black hair instead of Pete's sandy thatch, and he was taller and broader than Pete would have been.

Vera hastened to perform introductions. The stranger, Cullen learned, was Nate Hardesty, owner of the Circle H ranch, which was situated on the other side of the valley. Hardesty was good-looking in a rugged, dark way. He wore a neat gray suit and held a pipe in one muscular, large hand.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," Hardesty said as he shook hands with Cullen. "Any friend of Pete Jonker is a friend of mine right from the start."

"Glad to hear that," Cullen returned with an abstracted effort at politeness. He turned to Vera Jonker. "I notice Pete isn't around, Miss Jonker. Knowing him like I do, I hope he hasn't decided to take a sudden trip or anything like that. I'd been figuring on seeing him right away."

THE girl's face twisted in despair. She glanced at Hardesty, then dropped her eyes to her hands. "Pete's gone, Mr. Cullen. He . . . he disappeared."

"Disappeared. . . ." Cullen breathed. He stared at the girl, realizing that she was fighting to control her grief. Finally he looked at Hardesty.

The rancher moved his black mane in a grave nod. "Pete's disappeared, Mr. Cullen. Into thin air, it looks like. Nobody can figure out what happened to him. I have an idea, though. It might sound crazy to you, but it seems the only explanation for what happened to Pete. I think the spirits in Haunted Valley got him. He was always poking around there. You may argue there's no such things as spirits—but they've been seen. And I'm one of those who have seen them."

"You can add me to the list," Cullen said. He briefly related the weird incident he had witnessed while on his way to the ranch.

Hardesty's dark eyes glittered. "There! What more proof does anyone need that the stories about Haunted Valley aren't just a lot of foolishness? You're a stranger, Mr. Cullen, and nobody's put any ideas into your head—but you saw!"

"How long has that been going on?" Cullen asked.

Hardesty jerked his big shoulders

in a shrug. "Strange things have been told about Haunted Valley almost ever since it was first deserted."

Cullen nodded thoughtfully. He fingered his hat a moment, then turned to Vera. "When did Pete disappear, Miss Jonker?"

"About two weeks ago. It . . . it happened just a short time before I returned home from school." Her voice was unsteady.

That meant the girl hadn't known of his coming or of the purpose behind it, Cullen decided. Jonker's letter had been dated somewhat less than three weeks before. It had taken that long for the letter to reach Cullen and for him to travel a large part of the distance to the ranch by horse. He wondered if Vera Jonker knew about the silver specimen and the significance behind it. Quite likely she didn't. Pete would have known she was returning to the ranch, and he would have wanted to tell her the news in person, as was characteristic of him.

Vera spoke again, her voice stronger. "It was a terrible shock to learn that Pete had disappeared. I hadn't seen him for a long time, and I had been looking forward to being with him once more. He was all I had left in the way of a family."

"I know how you must have felt," Cullen said. "I had been wanting to see Pete again, myself."

The corners of the girl's red lips quirked in a slight smile of gratitude. She seemed more composed.

FOR the first time Cullen found himself studying her. She had small, clean-cut features and gray-green eyes that seemed disturbingly clear and direct. Her lashes and brows were a golden brown, contrasting with her thick, wheat-blonde hair. Her figure was slim and straight in a full-skirted, high-bodiced gown of dark blue wool. She wasn't exactly a beautiful girl, Cullen decided, but there was something warm and vital about her that he found more attractive.

Noting Cullen's gaze, she said, "Pete often mentioned you in his letters to me, Mr. Cullen. He seemed to think the world of you."

"Pete was the best friend I ever had," Cullen said simply.

Hardesty straightened up from the act of knocking the ashes from his pipe into the fireplace. "Did Pete send for you, Mr. Cullen?"

"Not exactly. He had been wanting me to visit the ranch for a long time. I finally got a vacation, and decided to drop in on him."

"Haunted Valley isn't the sort of place I'd choose for a vacation," Hardesty said as he began filling his pipe. "Didn't Pete ever tell you anything about it?"

"He didn't seem to take Haunted Valley very seriously."

"That was his mistake, Mr. Cullen. There's real danger in Haunted Valley. Pete's disappearance is the proof of it. Besides, you've seen the spirits. You know they aren't just a lot of idle talk."

Vera touched Cullen's arm. "I'm sorry you came all this distance for nothing, Mr. Cullen. With Pete gone . . ." She shook her head slightly and left the sentence unfinished.

"That's all right," Cullen said. "Even if I'd known about it before hand, I guess I'd have come anyway."

"Sure is too bad," Hardesty said. "What are you figuring to do now?"

"Why, I guess I'll sort of look around for Pete."

"It won't do any good, Mr. Cullen. Hook J riders searched Haunted Valley for Pete when he didn't come back. And I had my own boys out covering the hills. Nobody found hide or hair

of Pete."

"There might be something the others missed."

"Hardly likely. Besides, Haunted Valley's a bad place to go poking around into, alone. It wouldn't help none if you were to disappear, too."

"I think Mr. Hardesty is right," Vera put in. "There's something terribly wrong about Haunted Valley."

"I'm willing to take a risk, Miss Jonker," Cullen told her. "That is, if you want to put up with me."

She looked at him for a moment, and a smile seemed to come into her face, though there was no movement of her features. Finally she nodded. "You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Right now I know you must be tired and hungry after your trip. I'll be glad to prepare some—"

Cullen raised a hand quickly. "I'd be obliged if you wouldn't bother. You have company, and you weren't expecting me. I'll put up at the bunkhouse. The cook will make something for me, if you'll give the word."

Vera hesitated, then smiled. "All right. Ask for Chris Hansen. Tell him I said you're to have anything you want."

Cullen voiced his thanks, and after exchanging good-nights with Hardesty and the girl, left the room. He descended the porch steps slowly. Reaching his horse, he stood for a moment, gazing toward Haunted Valley. Something strange and cold came into his face.

CHAPTER II

"I'M GOING to get to the bottom of this, Pete!" he whispered. "All hell's going to bust loose before I'm finished!"

With his horse in a stall at the stable and its needs attended to, Cullen strode toward the bunkhouse. Pushing open the door, he found the Hook J riders gathered in a tense group about the long plank table in the middle of the bunk-lined room. Their faces looked grimly worried in the yellow light from the kerosene lamps that hung from the ceiling. One of the men was talking excitedly, while the others listened.

". . . came whoopin' and hollerin'. Spooks they was, just like Slim said. All white, and their hosses didn't make a sound. They drove the herd right at us. Me and Slim didn't hardly have time enough to run for our hosses. Then, with the herd stampedin', they lit out for South Pass."

"Me, I've had enough," another man added abruptly. He was tall and gangling, and Cullen decided he would be Slim. "I'm drawing my time in the morning. Going to find me a spread where they don't have spooks running around and raising hell."

There were mutters from his listeners. No voice was raised in derision. The punchers seemed to share Slim's feelings. Cullen realized that Vera Jonker was due to lose most of her riders. It wouldn't happen at once, perhaps, but it was a certainty as long as the apparently supernatural activities in Haunted Valley continued. Already at a disadvantage in managing the ranch because of her sex, the girl would be left in serious difficulties. And with the Hook J punchers exaggerating their experiences in town, it would be almost impossible for her to hire new hands. The stories would scare away prospective riders.

One of the group facing the door abruptly became aware of Cullen. His stare and the startled craning of his body brought Cullen to the attention of the others.

Cullen waved a hand. "Howdy, gents. Which one of you is Chris

Hansen?"

A short, thick-set man rose from the table. He had a mop of wiry red hair and a broad, pleasant face. "I'm Chris Hansen. Straw boss of the Hook J. Something you want?"

"Miss Jonker told me to see you. I'd be obliged for some grub and a place to bunk. My handle's Bret Cullen."

Hansen strode forward, his gaze frankly searching. What he saw brought a faint grin of approval to his wide lips. "Looking for a job?"

"Not right now. I sort of drifted in to see Pete Jonker, but just found out he disappeared."

Hansen snapped his fingers. "Cullen! That's it! The boss told me about you a couple of times. I'll be proud to do what I can for you." Taking Cullen's arm, Hansen led him toward the table and barked quick orders at the nearest punchers. "Get out of the way, you mavericks! Cook! Rustle up some hot grub!"

HANSEN sat beside Cullen while the latter ate. The foreman shook his red head morosely. "Too bad about the boss, him disappearing like that. Pete Jonker was a fine man. We all liked him."

"Does that include Nate Hardesty?" Cullen asked as he buttered his third thick slice of bread.

"You saw him at the house, eh? I'd say Hardesty's sweet on Miss Jonker. Been coming to the Hook J nearly every night. He never did that before. Hardesty always acted friendly enough, but the boss didn't like him. The two ranches being so close might have had something to do with it."

"Did Pete Jonker ever have any trouble with Hardesty?"

"Not that I know of. Why'd you ask that question?"

"I'm sort of checking on possibilities. You see, Hansen, I'm figuring to find out what happened to Pete Jonker."

Hansen shook his head. "You won't be able to turn up any more than me and the boys did. We went through Haunted Valley with a curry comb." The foreman hesitated an instant, then leaned closer to Cullen, his voice dropping. "You hear what we were talking about when you came in?"

"The spooks?"

"That's it. Sounds addle-brained to an outsider, I know, but fact is most of us here have seen them. A couple of the boys, Slim and Joe, had their herd stampeded by a whole mob of them just a while ago."

"I know," Cullen said. "I saw it happen on my way to the ranch. But there wasn't exactly a whole mob."

"You saw them!" Hansen breathed tensely. He made an abrupt gesture with one thick, blunt-fingered hand. "Well there you are. What I was leading up to about the spooks is that I think they're responsible for the boss disappearing the way he did. Nothing else to explain it."

"Pete Jonker was in Haunted Valley at the time, that right?"

"Uh, huh. Seemed like he spent a lot of time there."

"Any other men disappear in Haunted Valley before that?"

"About two or three that I've heard of. Lord knows how many others."

"Who were they?"

"Prospectors, I guess."

Cullen thoughtfully scraped his plate clean and finished the last of his coffee. "That must mean there's silver somewhere in Haunted Valley."

"I don't know about that," Hansen said. "From what I heard, the last of the big mines petered out more than thirty years ago. They took out all the

silver there was, but there might be some left. Or maybe men keep hoping there is."

"And Pete Jonker was one of them," Cullen said softly.

Hansen sucked in his breath. "Say, that must be why he spent so much time in Haunted Valley!" The foreman scratched his bristled chin ruefully. "I should have my head stuffed not to figure it out before."

"Didn't Pete Jonker ever mention he was looking for silver?"

"Not that I recollect. Maybe he didn't think it was worth talking about. You see, most folks don't think there's any silver left in Haunted Valley, or not enough worth bothering about. The big mine operators wouldn't have pulled out otherwise."

CULLEN produced makings and began rolling a cigarette. He spoke musingly. "Pete Jonker wouldn't have spent all that time in Haunted Valley unless he was looking for something important—like silver. The spooks didn't scare him. So . . . he disappeared."

"You mean the spooks and silver are tied up some way?"

"There's a good chance."

"It doesn't make sense. Why should the spooks want to keep anybody from looking for silver?"

"Maybe because the spooks aren't really spooks."

"But . . . but they've been seen! I've seen them—so have you."

"Does that mean they're spooks?"

"Well . . ." Hansen scratched his chin again.

Cullen lighted the cigarette he had made and drew in smoke. His blue eyes met Hansen's gaze in a deliberate stare. "What you see and what is are two different things. I wouldn't be too sure a spook is a spook unless I could get my hands on it." Then he rose with a nod and strolled outside.

Waiting until his eyes became readjusted to the moonlight, Cullen went to the stable where he obtained his duffle bag from among the things he had stripped from his horse. He returned to the bunkhouse, but didn't go in immediately. He leaned against the wall near the door, almost lost in shadow. He smoked down his cigarette, his glance straying often to the lighted windows of the ranch house.

Cullen's thoughts were grim. What he had learned so far about the circumstances surrounding Pete Jonker's disappearance made a pattern of a sort. He didn't know if it was exact in every detail, but he intended to find out. He knew he'd never be satisfied until the mystery was solved.

Finally Cullen tossed away the remains of his cigarette and bent to pick up the duffle bag at his feet. He stiffened into immobility as the ranch house door suddenly opened. He saw Hardesty step out to the porch. Behind the rancher Vera Jonker stood framed in the light from the doorway. Hardesty's voice reached Cullen faintly.

"But you'll think about it, won't you, Vera?"

"I'm afraid I won't change my mind," the girl's tones came in answer.

"With what's been going on, you need somebody to protect you, Vera. And there's the ranch. How are you going to manage it, alone?"

"I'll get along somehow."

Hardesty shook his head. "Ranching is a tough business for a woman. You'll need a man's help. Please think things over again, Vera. I'm not going to give up hope."

Presently Hardesty turned and began descending the steps and the door closed. Shortly before he reached

the ground Hardesty somehow tripped. He fell to hands and knees with an audible thud. Cursing, he straightened up again and brushed angrily at his clothes. He was still muttering invective when he strode toward the stable.

Despite his somber mood, Cullen grinned in the shadows of his vantage place.

AFTER breakfast the next morning Cullen drew Hanson aside. Most of the punchers had already left the bunkhouse, to begin the day's chores.

"I just thought of something," Cullen told the Hook J foreman. "Pete Jonker rode a horse when he went to Haunted Valley, didn't he?"

The foreman nodded. "That's right."

"The horse disappear with him?"

"No, it drifted back to the ranch. That's how we first found out something had happened to the boss."

"Is the horse here now?"

"At the stable. Miss Jonker has been riding it."

"I'd be obliged for a look at it."

Hansen gestured. "Sure. Come along."

The horse proved to be a thoroughbred stallion, sleek and long-limbed. Cullen led it outside and proceeded to inspect its shoes carefully. At last he straightened up and glanced at Hansen, who had been keeping the animal quiet.

"Did Miss Jonker ever ride this horse around Haunted Valley?"

"Once. She did a little poking around in Bullion City. I was with her."

Cullen nodded. "I'll have to allow for that."

"What are you figuring on doing?" Hansen asked curiously.

"I'm going to do some tracking. It might show what happened to Pete Jonker."

Hansen shook his head. "The trail's too old."

"I cut my teeth on old trails," Cullen returned. He made no other reference to his long training under a veteran cavalry scout, who had been an expert tracker, a training which he had put to good use in the Rangers, and which had made him an ace investigator for the Cattleman's Association.

A short time later Cullen was astride his gelding and moving swiftly in the direction of Haunted Valley.

He visited Bullion City first, dismounting at the lower end of the weed-grown main street and leading the gelding as he strode into the ghost town. He held his bone-handled Colt in his free hand. At frequent intervals he paused to listen intently, his narrowed eyes probing among the weather-beaten buildings on either side of him.

He heard no suspicious sounds, nor did he detect any slightest flicker of movement. Bullion City remained still and gray and desolate in the morning sunlight. Many of its wooden structures sagged tiredly under the weight of long neglect. Doorways gaped emptily, and numerous windows were broken. Here and there a wall had buckled or a roof caved in. Fallen signs lay among the weeds that had sprung up between the boards of the wooden sidewalks.

Without relaxing his vigilance, Cullen began searching the ground as he went along. Occasionally he stopped to examine something almost invisible amid the deep grass. What he learned brought a bleak smile to his lips.

He finally worked his way to the end of the main street. He saw that he was near the valley wall. Scattered about its base were a number of small wooden structures, evidently built-in mine entrances. In places open tunnels had been dug into the hills forming the valley wall at this end. Cullen

decided that most of the mines had been situated here.

HE RESUMED his search, directing it into a new channel. First he inspected the ground about the mine buildings, moving carefully so as not to obliterate possible tracks. Then he examined the interiors of the buildings. It took time. The sun climbed high into the sky, and it was afternoon before Cullen became aware that he was intensely hungry.

He decided to abandon his efforts for the time being, though he was dissatisfied with what he had accomplished so far. Previous searchers for Pete Jonker had left confusing tracks. He felt fairly certain of one thing, however, and it was that Jonker hadn't been interested in any of the old mines.

Cullen had moved a considerable distance along the valley wall, and thought of danger had become dimmed in his mind. He was suddenly reminded of his carelessness, for as he strode toward his horse, he heard a sharp crack of sound. Something threw up a small shower of earth several feet away.

He flung himself flat, snatching his gun from its holster. That had been a rifle shot, he knew. Hugging the ground, he searched grimly for its source. After a moment he saw a faint glitter among the brush on a hill slope diagonally upward from where he lay.

He snapped a shot at it and carefully but quickly changed position. An answering shot came in return. It was hastily made, however, and went wide.

Cullen waited, watching with squinting intentness. The brush up on the hill slope moved slightly as if disturbed by a body in passage. He fired again, but this time there was no response. The brush did not move again. Then, abruptly, there came the faint but unmistakable sound of running feet. A curve in the hill hid the runner from view. Listening, Cullen heard the footsteps fade out, to be replaced seconds later by the staccato drumming of hoofs. The noise died away, and the oppressive silence of Haunted Valley closed down once more.

Straightening erect, Cullen went swiftly up the hill. After a short search he found the ambuscade in which his attempted killer had lain. He examined the ground with minute care—and then a gasp of delight broke from his lips. He snatched at a small object that lay among the trampled weeds. Holding it in his palm, he stood up slowly, his features turning set and cold.

The object was a pipe.

CHAPTER III

SEVERAL minutes passed before Cullen roused into motion once more. He carefully placed the pipe in a pocket of his leather jacket and descended the hill slope toward his horse. Climbing into the saddle, he set out for the Hook J.

He dismounted at the stable. After unsaddling the gelding and seeing that it was provided with water, he strode toward the bunkhouse.

"Mr. Cullen!" a voice called abruptly.

He turned, recognizing Vera Jonker's soft tones. The girl was standing on the steps of the ranch house. He went over to her, touching his hat.

"Afternoon, Miss Jonker."

Her answering smile held a touch of shyness. She wore a green gingham dress, and her shining, wheat-blonde hair was bound back from her temples by a green ribbon. She looked slim and fresh in a way Cullen couldn't recall having noticed in other girls be-

fore. He was gazing into her gray-green eyes, trying to determine the difference, when she spoke again.

"You haven't had lunch yet, have you?"

Cullen shook his head. "I was figuring to see the cook at the bunkhouse about that."

Vera made a quick gesture of protest. "I'd been planning on having you take your meals at the house after this. You really are a guest, you know. You were Pete's best friend, and that's the least I can do in his place."

Cullen said gravely, "That's mighty considerate of you, Miss Jonker. I hope I won't be too much bother."

"I'm sure you won't. I've had lunch waiting for you. It'll take only a few minutes to get ready."

Cullen excused himself to clean up at the bunkhouse. The cook was the only man present, methodically peeling a large pan of potatoes. He was plump, bald, and red-featured. When Cullen explained that he had been invited to eat at the ranch house, he demanded:

"You didn't complain about my grub, did you?"

"It's past complaining about," Cullen returned.

The cook thought that over. Finally he scowled.

Cullen washed and carefully combed his hair. He donned a clean shirt and knotted a fresh scarf about his neck. Then, glancing about for a moment, he took a shirt hanging from one of the bunks and carefully wiped his boots. With a wink at the sourly watching cook, he strode out.

The ranch house door was open. Cullen walked tentatively into the living room, depositing his hat on the back of a chair. Clattering sounds came from the kitchen along with fragrant odors. Presently Vera appeared in the dining room entrance, holding two filled, steaming plates.

"Come in and sit down, Mr. Cullen."

The food was excellent, despite the fact that it had been warmed over, and Cullen did it justice. He found himself talking to Vera with an ease that astonished him. She was a good listener, and her own remarks were made with humor and intelligence.

The conversation gradually came around to the circumstances of Cullen's friendship with Pete Jonker. He told the girl of the adventures they had had during their service in the Rangers.

Finally she said, "Mr. Cullen, you mentioned last night that Pete had invited you for a visit. But isn't there a chance that he felt there was some sort of danger here, and that he wanted your help?"

Cullen nodded, smiling faintly. "You guessed it. I didn't feel free to explain that in front of Nate Hardesty. So many strange things had happened, I wasn't ready to trust anyone." He produced the envelope containing Pete Jonker's letter and the assayer's report, which he removed from his other shirt, and handed it to the girl.

HER features twisted with perplexity as she read. "But Pete doesn't explain what was wrong. And he doesn't say what the silver sample means."

"It's easy to guess the first part," Cullen said. "Pete was writing about the spooks that have been running wild in Haunted Valley. He just didn't think it wise to mention them that plainly. In a letter it would have looked like he had gone crazy. As for the silver ore sample, that's the real mystery. Didn't he ever mention that he had located silver in Haunted Valley?"

Vera shook her head. "Pete had an

annoying habit of keeping things secret until the very last moment."

"But didn't he leave behind—notes, or maps?"

She shook her head again. "I looked, Mr. Cullen. You see, I hoped that Pete had left some message for me. I couldn't find anything that—" She broke off sharply, stiffening in her chair. "I've just remembered something! I think it might help. Excuse me a moment." She rose and hurried from the room.

Cullen rolled a cigarette, excitement surging through him. He hoped that whatever the girl had recalled would prove a definite lead.

Vera returned with a newspaper clipping, brittle and yellow with age. "I found this in Pete's desk," she explained. "It's the only thing he left that mentions silver in any way."

The clipping, Cullen found, was dated fifteen years before and seemed to be part of an article dealing with ghost towns which had once been the scenes of lucrative silver mining activities. The major part of the clipping dealt with Bullion City, detailing a legend concerning it. A decade previously an old prospector named Muley Rankin had reported finding a rich silver lode somewhere around Bullion City. He'd had a fifty-pound chunk of high-grade silver ore to bear out his story. No one had ever learned the location of the lode. Muley Rankin had drunk himself to death shortly after on the money he had received for the ore, and had jealously kept his secret to the very end.

The old prospector's discovery had started a minor stampede, but the lode had never been found. It had become one of the legends that lend an aura of mystery and romance to man's eternal quest for precious metals.

Vera said slowly, "Thinking back now, I seem to recall hearing my father mention the Muley Rankin silver lode . . . to some friends who were visiting, I think it was. But that was a long time ago. I was just a child."

"Your father knew about the lode before it was written about in this clipping?"

"Yes. I think he was one of the first persons who searched for it. Evidently he didn't find anything, and decided to settle here."

"Then it apepars that other persons living around Haunted Valley also know about the Muley Rankin lode."

"I guess so."

Cullen nodded thoughtfully, his face grim. "One thing seems certain now. The silver sample Pete sent me came from the lode—which means he must have found it. The location of the lode is still a mystery, though. But if I don't know where it is, at least I'm pretty sure I know where it isn't. And that's in any of the old mines."

"But where else would it be?"

"Some place where nobody ever thought of looking. My guess would be Bullion City."

Vera whispered, "Pete found the lode —and he disappeared." She leaned toward Cullen in sudden appeal. "Mr. Cullen, you must have some idea of what happened to Pete. Tell me. I've got to know. The uncertainty has been driving me mad."

Cullen looked away. "I'm sure I know what happened to Pete. But it isn't anything you would want to hear."

"He's dead, isn't that it? I've suspected that for a long time."

Cullen inclined his head gravely.

"Who could have done away with him? The . . . spooks?"

"That's something I aim to find out."

VERA looked up at the table for a long moment, her gray-green eyes

misty and her lower lip caught between her teeth. Then she stood up, forcing a smile. "I'd better clear away the dishes."

"I'll help you, if you'll let me," Cullen offered. "I'm a slick hand with dishes."

"All right."

With Vera to talk to, wiping dishes proved a pleasant and even a glamorous task. Cullen was almost regretful when the last dish had been dried and put away.

Later they strolled outside to watch the sunset. Vera spoke of her days in college. She had been planning to teach school, but had since decided to manage the ranch.

"I think I can make a go of it—though Nate Hardesty doesn't seem to think so," she said. "Otherwise he has been very kind." She hesitated a moment. "He . . . he has been asking me to marry him."

Cullen had already guessed that from the incident between the girl and the rancher which he had witnessed the previous night. He didn't mention it, but waited for the girl to continue.

As though it were an unimportant point, yet still one that had to be emphasized, she said, "I'm not interested in marrying him, of course."

"The Hook J and the Circle H would make one mighty big ranch," Cullen murmured.

Vera laughed. "Perhaps Nate Hardesty has been thinking about that. Where I'm concerned, there's something about him that strikes me as being . . . well, not entirely sincere."

"Must be something wrong with his eyes!" Cullen said.

It was dark now, and the moon had risen above the hills, flooding the land with silver radiance. Cullen and the girl walked slowly back to the ranch house. They were silent—but it was an understanding silence. Cullen found himself wondering over the fact that he and the girl had somehow taken to calling each other by their first names.

At the steps Vera paused, glancing at Cullen with a return of her earlier sober mood. "What are you planning to do, Bret? About Pete, and the silver lode?"

"Keep on searching. I think the lode's in Bullion City somewhere. If it is, I'll find it."

"You're placing yourself in danger, Bret. Pete disappeared, you know."

"Danger is something I've grown used to."

"I hope you'll be careful."

"I will, Vera."

They stood looking at each other for a tense moment. Then the girl's eyes dropped. With a whispered goodnight, she turned and hurried up the steps.

Cullen strode thoughtfully to the bunkhouse. He found Hansen among those few who had not yet turned in. The foreman drew Cullen aside, speaking in low tones.

"Find out anything?"

"A little. For one, somebody took a rifle shot at me while I was in Haunted Valley this afternoon. Searching the place where the shot came from, I found this." Cullen held out the pipe.

"Hardesty!" Hansen breathed. "Hardesty smokes a pipe."

Cullen nodded slowly. He pocketed the pipe again and asked, "Hansen, have you ever heard of the Muley Rankin silver lode?"

The foreman frowned in an effort at recollection. Finally he nodded. "Now that you mention it, I think I have. But it's supposed to be a sort of fairy tale. Nobody's ever found the Muley Rankin lode."

"I think Pete Jonker did," Cullen said. "And that's why he disappeared."

A shudder ran up and down Cullen's spine

Hansen whistled silently.

ANOTHER morning, but Bullion City was the same, gray and desolate in the sunlight. Cullen led his horse down the main street, glancing at the weather-beaten buildings with a new intentness. Somewhere among them, unless he was completely wrong, was the Muley Rankin lode. If he were right, however, finding it would be no easy task.

Cullen had had breakfast with Vera, who for some reason had seemed curiously shy. She had wanted to accompany him on his search, but he had insisted that she remain at the ranch. Still vivid in his mind had been the rifle shot of the preceding day.

Now Cullen paused to study the arrangement of the town. The main street, he saw led directly toward the silver mines around the foot of the valley wall. The fact took on a sudden, vivid importance. He knew that the Muley Rankin lode might be anywhere, but the most natural place for it to be was near the original silver deposits. And if the lode were somewhere in Bullion City, it would logically be in that portion of the town nearest the mines.

Cullen decided to begin his search from that direction. He started with the shacks scattered about at the town's upper end, gradually working his way down to the town buildings proper. He scanned the floors carefully, searching for signs or indifferences in the layers of dust and sand. He tapped walls for dummy partitions.

The hours trickled away. Cullen was weary and on the verge of discouragement when he reached a large frame building that had once been a saloon. At first the floors showed him nothing that he had not seen already —warped boards, split and crumbled in places, and held down by rusted nails and covered over with layers of drifted sand. Then, at the far end of the barroom, he made a discovery. In places where his boots had scraped the sand from the boards, the nailheads fastening the planks down showed bright and new.

An instant after verifying his discovery, he threw himself into an excited search for something which could be used as a tool in prying up the boards. Less than a quarter of an hour later, he returned with a rusted iron bar, and an equally rusted shovel, both of which he had found in the store room of an abandoned hardware store. He removed his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and began work.

Before long Cullen had the boards torn up in a space roughly seven feet in diameter. His excitement increased as he saw that the ground was packed in loosely, as though it had been dug up and shoveled back in not long before. He seized the shovel he had found, congratulating himself for his forethought in bringing it along. He wielded the tool with feverish haste.

The loose earth came out quickly and easily. Cullen presently found that he was digging down into a shaft about five feet wide. It had been made a long time in the past, as the gray and hard-packed edges indicated. No doubt remained in his mind that he had found the Muley Rankin lode.

Cullen was a little over three feet down when he found the hat. It was damp and moldy, but still in good condition. He realized it hadn't been in the shaft long. Turning it about in his hands, he saw the initials stamped in the sweat band.

P. J. Pete Jonker.

HIS features hard and gray, Cullen put the hat down slowly. He

took up the shovel again and resumed his digging. Minutes later the shovel struck something firm and unyielding. When Cullen had cleared more of the earth away, he saw what the obstruction was—a boot. Only there was a foot in it—or what remained of a foot. Cullen had only to dig a little deeper to be certain that he had found not only the Muley Rankin lode, but the badly decayed body of Pete Jonker as well.

He was staring blindly into the shaft, sick and angry, when he heard a board creak behind him. He whirled, all shouting nerves, his hand flashing toward his gun. He saw a weird, white-sheeted figure leaping at him, a board in its hands raised high. Before he could pull the trigger of the gun, the board swished down. It hit his head a glancing blow and crashed into his shoulder. Pain exploded within him, bringing a sudden darkness, a sudden end to thought and feeling.

CHAPTER IV

THE darkness was breaking up. Someone was shoveling it away, and little by little light came through to him. Cullen opened his eyes, blinked dazedly, then weakly. pushed himself to a sitting position in the shaft. He remembered digging into the shaft, discovering the body of Pete Jonker, and then hearing the creak that had heralded the attack by the white-sheeted apparition. Who had—

Cullen stiffened as a sharp sound abruptly echoed through the town. Full awareness returned to him with a rush. That had been a gunshot!

He looked around for his bone-handled Colt. It was gone.

As he climbed slowly erect, grimacing in pain, more gunshots crashed. A voice shouted thickly. Cullen staggered toward the sagging batwing doors at the other end of the saloon, his hand at his head. His fingers were sticky with blood from the gash in his scalp. The blood hadn't caked, and he knew he had been unconscious only for little more than several minutes.

Peering cautiously from between the batwings, Cullen saw a man stalking in his direction, gun in hand. It was Nate Hardesty, his features wary and tense. The rancher saw Cullen before the latter could duck back.

"You murdering skunk!" Hardesty snapped. "Stay where you are, or I'll kill you!"

Cullen remained motionless. Without a gun, he was at a disadvantage. Flight would avail him nothing.

"I winged you, eh?" Hardesty said grimly as he came up. His dark eyes were taking in Cullen's blood-soaked head. "You had it coming to you for what you did."

"What are you talking about?" Cullen demanded.

"As if you didn't know! I suppose you're going to say you didn't bushwhack my foreman, Stud Shram, while him and me were riding into the town. Here's your gun to prove it!" Hardesty pulled a bone-handled Colt from the waistband of his trousers with his free hand.

Cullen had an empty feeling. The gun was his, all right.

"I found it on the floor of the store you were hiding in," Hardesty explained. "You must have dropped it when I winged you."

Cullen shook his head with grave emphasis. "At the time you claim I shot your foreman, I was just getting over a sock on the head. I was doing some investigating in there"—Cullen jerked his thumb toward the interior of the saloon—"and someone in a white sheet came up behind me and hit me

with a board. I heard the shots, and found my gun was gone."

"A likely story!" Hardesty jeered.

"Not any more likely than your own," Cullen said. "I have only your word for it that your foreman was shot."

"I'll show you!" Hardesty growled. He gestured with the two guns he held. "Come on—and watch your step."

The rancher led Cullen toward the center of the main street. At one side stood two saddled horses. Cullen was close to the horses before he saw the body of a man lying face upward in the deep grass covering the street. The corpse was that of a stranger to Cullen, sandy-haired and husky, the hard cast of the blunt features now relaxed in death. Blood stained the shirt from a bullet hole in the chest, directly over the heart.

"That's Stud Shram," Hardesty said. "Satisfied?"

Cullen shrugged. "How do I know you didn't kill him yourself?"

"Why on earth should I have done that?"

"Maybe because Shram suspected you were up to something and followed you here. You had just hit me over the head, and were getting ready to finish me for good. But you heard Shram coming. You took my gun, ran along behind the buildings fronting on the main street, and shot him. Then, finding me awake, you decided to palm the whole thing off on me, since it would be a safer method of getting me out of the way."

"You're crazy," Hardesty said. "You could never prove anything like that. Remember I have your gun."

"There's something else I'm sure I could prove," Cullen persisted. "I could prove that you took a shot at me with a rifle yesterday afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

CULLEN pointed up the main street, at a spot on the hill slope some distance to the right of the mine structures. "A rifle was fired at me from up there. I went over the spot and found a pipe. You're just about the only one around here who smokes a pipe, Hardesty."

The rancher said slowly, "I lost my pipe when I visited Vera Jonker at the Hook J the night before last. I tripped on the steps, and it must have fallen out of my pocket."

"A likely story," Cullen mocked. "Suppose—just suppose, Hardesty—that I told Vera Jonker how I had found the pipe. Then suppose I told her you knew that had happened to her brother, Peter Jonker. And suppose I told her you knew, because Circle H riders, wearing white sheets and with rags muffling the hoofs of their horses, were really the spirits that have been scaring Hook J punchers and cattle. Suppose I told her you were doing that, because you wanted to scare people away from searching for the Muley Rankin silver lode, so that you would have time to find it yourself. Also, you had been using your spirit trick to scare Vera into marrying you—something she hadn't seemed much interested in. You wanted possession of the Hook J, because you knew the silver lode was located somewhere on Hook J land, Bullion City being a part of it."

Hardesty's features were pale and drawn. The weapons in his hands shook. "Damn you!" he whispered. "Damn you, Cullen! If you've told Vera anything like that, I'll kill you here and now!"

"I may not have told her just yet—but she'll find out if anything happens to me. I took care of that end before I came to Bullion City, Hardesty. Besides, I wrote down the location of the

Muley Rankin silver lode. That'll be another of your aces lost. If she knows where the lode is, she won't ever think of marrying you. She'll have enough money to buy all the protection and help she needs."

Only one fact seemed to have registered with Hardesty. "You've found the Muley Rankin silver lode?" he gasped. "Show me where, Cullen! Take me there at once."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then I'll kill you immediately. My story will be that you attacked me and Stud Shram. You shot Shram, and I killed you protecting myself."

"You're forgetting the information that Vera Jonker will get if anything happens to me."

"You're bluffing, Cullen, and you know it! Now get a move on. Play any more games with me, and you're going to get what Shram got."

CULLEN shrugged helplessly, turned, and led the way back toward the saloon. Hardesty's dark eyes widened at sight of the boots of Pete Jonker's corpse protruding from the shaft. Then, as his gaze took in the significance of the shaft itself, his features lighted in triumph. He glanced at Cullen with a thin smile.

"I think I'm going to tell that story of mine after all. You killed Shram, and I killed you. I can use the knowledge about the location of the Muley Rankin lode, here, to force Vera to marry me. If she refuses, she'll never know where the lode is. But I don't think she'll refuse. There's a lot of money involved, and she's a sensible girl. She'll see—"

Hardesty's voice chopped off abruptly. The sound of a falling object had come from one of the adjoining rooms. As the rancher whirled to face the entrance, a figure darted into sight. It was a short, thick-set figure, with broad, pleasant features, grim now, and wiry red hair showing under the hatbrim. Cullen had only an instant to recognize Chris Hansen before the thunder of guns roared through the saloon.

When the powder smoke cleared away a moment later, Cullen saw Hansen still erect, watching Hardesty with bleak intentness. The rancher's hands were clutching at his middle, an expression of shocked agony on his dark face. He swayed, and then his knees bent and he fell limply to the floor near the edge of the shaft. He didn't move again.

Hansen strode forward. He grinned at Cullen and holstered his gun. "That was close!" he said. "This sneaking coyote was fixing to kill you."

Cullen nodded. "You came just in time." He went across the shaft, to where Hardesty lay, bending over the rancher's body. For a moment Cullen's back was turned toward Hansen. As he pretended to examine Hardesty, he used the opportunity to slide his gun from the rancher's limp hand and shove the weapon into his belt. Finally he straightened. He looked down at Hardesty a moment longer, then turned.

Hansen gestured. "Miss Jonker happened to mention that you had gone to Bullion City, and she seemed worried about you. I thought I'd see if everything was all right. Good thing I did. I saw Hardesty taking you in here."

Cullen shook his head slightly, his features solemn and almost pitying. "It's no good, Hansen."

"No good? I don't get it."

"It's too late to climb out of the mess now. You cinched the whole thing against yourself by what you did yesterday afternoon. You, Hansen,

are the one who killed Pete Jonker and buried him here. You are the one who shot at me with a rifle yesterday, leaving Hardesty's pipe to throw me off the trail. And you are the one who hit me over the head a while ago, and then used my gun to kill Stud Shram, hoping it would get me into serious trouble with Hardesty. I was certain—"

Cullen ducked aside with the instantaneous reaction of tight-wound nerves. Hansen's hand was stabbing down toward his holstered gun. The gun roared—but Cullen's own Colt was thundering an answer. He was fanning back the hammer with the palm of his right hand, triggering the weapon so rapidly that the reports seemed continuous.

HANSEN stiffened, jerking, his gun dropping from splayed fingers. He poised a moment, on tiptoe, his thick-set body straining forward. Then he dropped, falling half in and half out of the shaft.

Cullen sighed and relaxed slowly. Pain brought him information of the bullet gash on his arm. He bound his neck scarf around it, then wearily strode outside. He found his horse, mounted, and rode down the main street toward the Hook J.

He passed the last building at the end of the street, when he saw a mounted figure approaching. Slim and boyish, wheat-blonde hair under a white Stetson. It was Vera.

"Bret!" she called, relief evident in her tone. She drew up beside him. "What happened back there? I heard shots."

"It's all over," Cullen said. "The mystery of Pete's disappearance, the location of the Muley Rankin lode, the explanation for the spooks—everything. All over."

Cullen explained as they rode slowly back to the ranch house. "Hansen knew Pete was looking for the Muley Rankin lode, though he pretended to know little or nothing about it. He followed Pete to Bullion City a short time after Pete wrote to me, and found out just where the lode was. Pete had been working in the old shaft Muley Rankin had made when Hansen appeared. They argued. Maybe Pete fired Hansen. Or maybe Hansen had been wanting to get his hands on the lode all along. Anyway, he beat Pete to the draw, and killed him, burying him in the shaft.

"Hansen thought he was in the clear until I came along. He probably had been hoping to take out silver little by little on the sly and sell it. That way he would soon have enough money to buy the Hook J and own the lode outright. He didn't think he would have trouble getting you to sell, because he thought the spooks in Haunted Valley would scare you into it eventually. The spooks, by the way, were just Circle H riders dressed in white sheets and riding white horses—or horses which had been powdered white. Hardesty had been making a play for the Rankin lode, too."

Cullen went into detail on that point, and then continued: "Hansen was afraid I would somehow find out something against him, and he tried to throw me off the trail by shooting at me and then leaving a pipe which Hardesty had previously dropped, at the scene. But I happen to have a lot of experience in tracking. The signs told me that a man of Hansen's build rather than Hardesty's had tried to shoot me. I don't think Hansen really tried to do that, though. He was just working out a plan to set me against Hardesty.

"Hansen knew I was close to finding the lode. He followed me to Bullion City today, and stunned me with a

board while disguised in a white sheet one of Hardesty's riders had probably left somewhere around. Hansen intended to kill me, but just then Hardesty and Stud Shram showed up. Hansen got another idea. He took my gun and shot Shram, leaving it for Hardesty to find. That, he thought, would get me out of the way and leave his own hands a little cleaner. But it backfired. Hansen had stretched his rope a little too far."

VERA considered the information in silence, a kind of pained wonder on her small face. Finally she glanced at Cullen.

"What are you going to do now, Bret?"

He shrugged, forcing a grin. "This started out as a vacation. Maybe it'll end up that way, now."

"But after that, Bret?"

"I still have my job."

"I think I can offer you a better one," Vera said. "With Hansen gone, I'll need a foreman. And with all the money coming in from the silver, I'll need someone to protect me. Would you like the job, Bret?"

"I'll say I would! Only it won't be a job. It'll be one long vacation."

WESTERN BRAIN-MIXERS

★ (ANSWERS) ★

(QUESTIONS ON PAGE 85)

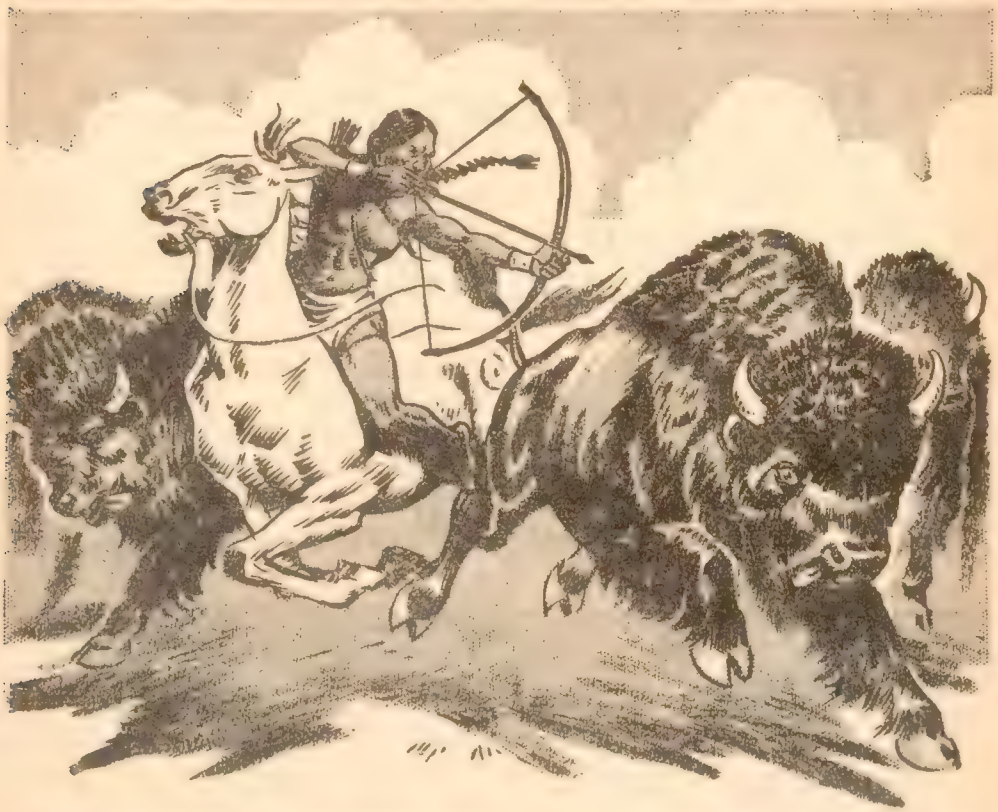
1. 1. Diamond Tail. 2. Barb Wire. 3. Three Circle.
2. The prospector's three main tools are the pick and shovel and pan.
3. Ed Schieffelin was the founder of the wild silver-mining town of Arizona. Tombstone was founded April 1879.
4. Wyatt Earp, John Ringo, Doc Holliday, Billy Breakenridge, Russian Bill, Ike Clanton, John Slaughter, Curly Bill an' Buckskin Frank Leslie.
5. According to the old-time cattleman's point of view free grass range is what the open range is called.
6. Copper is the best metal used for making a branding iron, although iron is sometimes used.
7. Ocotillo, yucca, barrel, beaver tail, rainbow, prickly pear, nigger head, hedge hog, buckhorn, mescal, joshua tree, cholla, pincushion, sahuaro and Spanish bayonet.
8. True. Brands for cattle should be seven or eight inches tall.
9. Ed and Al Schieffelin and Richard Gird were the three partners who discovered the first silver mines in Tombstone, Arizona.
10. In the days of the open range the cattleman's cuss word was "fence." Because if it was anything the old-time cattleman hated it was a fence.
11. Because dehorned cattle feed more quietly an' do not injure each other.
12. The Grand Central, the Contention and the Lucky Cuss.
13. The brand put on sheep is made by branding liquid which leaves a mark on the wool similar to that which would be made by paint. This brand is placed on the back of the sheep and is generally black, red or green, although many colors may be used. In addition to the brand it is customary for the owner to have an ear mark on each of his sheep, which is made by cutting or punching a small piece out of the sheep's ear. While it shall be an easy matter to obliterate the brand on the back of the animal it would be more difficult to change the ear-mark without detection. Some sheep owners are now using small nose brands which is burned into the skin, when the lambs are from seven to ten days old, their tails are cut off as they are earmarked and branded.
14. Tombstone, Arizona.
15. Frank Stilwell.
16. Pete Kitchen.
17. Bat Masterson only killed four men. Wyatt Earp testified to this statement. Earp knew Masterson all of his life, having lived together and hunted buffalo together. They corresponded with one another until Masterson's death.
18. Tombstone, Arizona.
19. True. The first article in the unwritten book of manners of the early West was that a stranger must not be asked personal questions.
20. A sluice box is a more effective placer mining device. It is a long, slender trough ten or twelve feet long in length and about a foot square at the ends.

* * *

THE HORSE AND THE PLAINS INDIAN

By CHARLES REEVES

THE HORSE WAS MORE USEFUL TO THE INDIAN OF THE PLAINS THAN THE RIFLE



THE horse was not native to America, but remarkably soon after its arrival became important to the Indians of the Plains, and changed their lives considerably. Horses were first brought to this country from Europe by the early Spanish adventurers. Runing wild, or traded to the red men, they soon spread across the country.

Before the coming of the horse, life on the Plains was cramped and limited. Most tribes lived on the edges of the plains, depending for their food more upon the crops and game of the wooded, fertile regions, than upon the buffalo of the bare prairies. Camps were moved on foot, laboriously, and dogs were used to drag baggage attached to poles for, strangely, the useful wheel was also introduced by the white men.

When the horse appeared, and it was possible for the Indians to follow the vast herds of buffalo, and travel miles in search of water, many tribes came from surrounding areas to the Plains, and made their homes there. With the aid of the horse, it was a simple matter to move a large camp often, every day if necessary. The horse gave to the life of the Indians a scope and dash hitherto impossible. They adopted the horse with joy, and speedily remade their lives from pastoral, quiet pursuits to nomadic, adventurous wanderings.

For a hundred years the Plains Indians used the horse, which had come to them from the white man, before they had much contact, or serious conflict, with the white man himself.

* * *

COMING IN THE APRIL ISSUE OF

MAMMOTH WESTERN—

WILLIAM HOPSON'S

"LAST OF THE TINHORNS"

AN ENTERTAINING AND THRILLING NOVEL!

the TRIGGER of the GUN

by Robert Moore Williams

Jed had to be sure he was right before he would pull the trigger of a six-gun. The sight of Sue though, made him recall his own pride . .

JED REPP shoved open the right-hand bat-wing door of the Antler saloon to step outside. The door clumped solidly as he shoved it against someone so unfamiliar with saloons as to try to enter the wrong side of a pair of swinging doors. "Sorry," he said, then stopped quickly as the door swung back and revealed the girl standing there.

"Susan!" he whispered. "Susan New —Sue! Did I hurt you?"

The bartender took one look at the grim figure that came out of the cabin and started to run. Jed shot him, coolly

The door had hit her big fur muff, he saw, with a *clump* that was far louder and solider than it had any right to be. A pair of gray eyes was staring at him from a face out of which all traces of color were swiftly draining.

"Shucks, Sue," he said, a laugh at the pure joy of seeing her again, no matter what the circumstances, bubbled on his lips. "Don't look at me like that."

"Jed!" she whispered.

This was Susan Fox, *nee* Newton, in a stylish dress and a picture hat and a big fur muff that would have cost a cowboy a month's wages. For years she had been his girl here in the town of Ligett, Texas, as kids together, until they both had somehow suddenly grown up and he had realized she was Susan Newton and what being Susan Newton meant in terms of cattle and land, in terms of a big house in town and a ranch that sprawled across square miles of Texas soil. When he had finally realized the meaning of these things, he had quarreled with her, and had gone away. She had married, he had heard, soon after he left Ligett, hastily. Now he was back, riding into town after a year's absence, and within an hour after his return to Ligett, he had met her again, in the door of the Antler saloon, and she was carrying a muff that had clumped too solidly against a swinging bat-wing door. Much too solidly.

His eyes were on her face, hungrily devouring every feature of it. "It's good to see you again, Sue."

She stared at him as if he was a ghost. She was pale, too pale, and the lips that he remembered as full and made to be kissed were set in a straight, narrow line. And she had been pushing against the door of the saloon as if she had intended to open it. He reached out his hand and felt of her muff and the object hidden in that muff was plain to his probing fingers. His eyes widened.

"No, girl!" he whispered. "No, Sue. No!"

"Please, Jed, I have something to do."

"Something that needs a gun inside a muff?" he questioned.

She nodded, grimly, as if her mind was made up. He shook his head, the shock of this situation was like a sudden and unexpected plunge into a river of icy water. "We got law in this country now, girl. We don't use guns." His right hand went down to his hip where there was no open holster, no holster of any kind. "In the old days, I know they used them, and needed to use 'em. But not any more and especially not a girl. No girl ever needs to use a gun. If worse comes to worse, there are men who will use it for her."

"I'll kill my own rats," she whispered. "I wouldn't ask a man to do my job for me."

SHE was the daughter of old Bruck Newton, and old Bruck had always done his own gun chores, in the days when such things were necessary. Her father's blood was strong in her. He saw there was no chance to argue with her. "What if the rats don't want to get killed?" he said.

"Then I'll get killed," she answered. "And don't think I'll mind. Life isn't worth living the way it is now."

"Susan!" She was talking wild, she was talking out of her head.

"I mean it, Jed," she said.

He laid his hand on her arm. "I've been gone, Sue. I don't know what's happened. Who are you going to use that gun on?"

"It's none of your business, Jed."

"I'm making it some of my business."

"You can't. It's too late. You had your chance long ago, and threw it away. Now—"

"Who is it?" he said.

She took a deep breath. All color had gone out of her face, her eyes were gray pools of defiant misery. "His name is Harley Fox," she said.

"Um," Jed Repp said. If the name hit him a double-handed lick under the belt buckle, his face revealed no sign of the blow. The pupils of his eyes widened as if he had suddenly stepped into a dark room and his eyes were trying to accommodate themselves to the absence of light. "Seems to me that I heard you had married a man by that name," he said.

"I did marry him. I am married to him."

"And you're looking for him with a gun?"

"I am." She was old Bruck Newton's daughter all right and the fact showed in the tone of her voice.

"Mind telling me why you're looking for him?"

"It's not a pretty story—"

"I don't expect it to be. Get on with it."

"You know Harley Fox," she said and Jed nodded. Harley Fox had been in Ligett a year before Jed left and he knew the man. "He's handsome and he talks fast," she went on. "He's got everything a woman would want in a man except one thing—loyalty. I admit I made a mistake in marrying him but he dazed me off my feet. Nobody had ever made love to me the way he did."

"There are different ways of making love," he said. "Go on."

"We hadn't been married a month before I knew he drank too much. At the end of two months I knew he gambled too much, more than he—more than I could afford. I clamped down on the gambling. The B-N ranch wasn't going to be lost across a card table." Inside her muff, he could see her hand clinch around the handle of the gun. "Did that stop the gambling?" he said.

"No. It started the thieving."

"Cattle?"

"I'm positive of it. He's working with a gang and they're stealing my cattle. My husband helping men steal my cattle!" Her face twisted. "Perhaps I could have tolerated that but then I learned he had been with other women."

"I see," Jed Repp said.

"So stand aside," she said. "I'm going in there."

He shook his head. "He isn't in the Antler. I just came out of it."

Her eyes dug into his face. "You're lying, Jed," she said.

He shrugged, his face bleak and hard. "If I am, you had better accept that lie. Believe me, Susan, you do not want to do this."

Her hand moved in the muff. "Do you want to do it for me, Jed?"

"Lord, Susan!" he gasped. "This has to be thought about. There are other ways—" The swinging door hit him in the back and Harley Fox came out of the saloon. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of expensive riding breeches, a fawn-colored Stetson was thrust back on his forehead, a nickle-plated gun in a tooled leather holster hung at his hip. His eyes widened at the sight of Jed Repp, narrowed at the sight of the woman he called his wife.

HER hand moved inside the muff. Jed Repp caught her arm. "No, Susan."

"Take your hand off me."

"Please."

"Take your hands off my wife," Harley Fox said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jed Repp saw the man throw the punch. He jerked up an elbow, part of the force

of the blow went into the raised arm. At the same instant he ducked, and Susan Fox jerked her arm free.

Harley Fox stared at the gun coming out of the muff from eyes suddenly surcharged with fear. He knew he had wronged this woman, he knew he had played fast and loose with her, and now he suddenly realized she was the daughter of one of the roughest old sintwisters who ever rode a rough-shod horse up the trail to hell. She was a woman, yes, and he had thought women were weak things, creatures for play, for the pleasure of an hour, and now he suddenly realized she was not only a woman but a woman of the same hell-bending breed who had won the west, with six-gun and rifles, fighting Indians and deserts and mountains and death and each other with equal impartiality. The sight of the gun coming out of the muff hit Harley Fox the hardest blow he had even taken in a misspent life. He grabbed at his polished weapon.

Jed Repp jerked the pistol from the girl's hand, the muff flew out into the street, and with the same sweeping movement that had taken the gun from her he hit Harley Fox across the side of the head with the barrel of the gun. Fox's gun dropped half-drawn from his hand and he stumbled backward and through the bat-wing doors of the Antler saloon, stilling all sounds of activity therein.

Jed Repp heard the clump of Harley Fox falling inside the saloon, heard the creak of the swinging doors, the sudden pound of his own heart. Her eyes were on his face. He stepped past her and her eyes followed him. He picked up her muff from the street, brushed dust from it, handed it to her.

"Jed—" she whispered.

Eyes were watching them along the street, he knew, had been watching them ever since they had collided at the door of the saloon. A cowboy was holding his prancing horse and stared popeyed at them. A woman with a market basket under her arm had her mouth open a foot. Tongues had already wagged about him and this woman; now they would wag even more. What they said about him did not matter, to him, but what they said about her might easily be a matter of life and death. For this encounter, whether he willed it or not, changed the life of this woman, changed his life, changed the opinion people had of them, changed everything. Her eyes were hungry on his face. "Jed—" she whispered again, very softly.

"I'll see you again, Susan," he said. "You go on home now." He tipped his hat, turned, walked down the street. His heels rattled on the board walk. He had gone almost a block before he realized he was still carrying her revolver in his hand. He hastily put the gun in his pocket. Heels pounded behind him and a voice yelled, "Jed! Jed Repp!" He turned. Old Sim Ritter, vest open, guns flapping at each hip, whiskers flying in the wind, was trying to catch up with him. Sim Ritter was one of the last of the old-time ranchers around Ligett. He had ridden Jed Repp on the toes of his boot when Jed was a baby. Jed's hand went out automatically. "Old Timer, I'm glad to see you."

His hand was wrung with a fierceness that revealed the depth of feeling Sim Ritter had for this tall lean man that he had watched grow up from a boy. "Long time no see," Sim Ritter said. "You went away, Jed, boy, 'thout tellin' folks where you was goin' or was you comin' back." Keen blue eyes searched Jed's face as the old man spoke.

"I know," Jed said.

"I'd consider it a privilege to buy you a drink, son."

"No, girl!" he whispered. "No, Sue. No!"

"TAKEN," Jed said. They went into the Road to Ruin saloon, Sim Ritter tipping his hat to the sign. "One thing you can say for Mack Rush, he advertises honest," he said, laughing. "I always tip my hat to an honest man or an honest sign."

"I bet in the old days weeks passed without you taking off your hat in this town."

"Months, son, months. And the town ain't changed so much that I get a crick in my elbow from takin' off my hat nowadays, son. What'll you have?" Mack Rush, owner and bartender of the Road to Ruin came ponderously along the bar to serve them, and his bear hand came across the mahogany when he saw Jed Repp. "Put 'er there, Jed. And it's on the house."

"Folks remember you around here," Sim Ritter said, laughing. "First time I've heard Mack Rush say it was on the house since I can't remember when. Whiskey for me, Mack, firewater, panther juice." He pounded on the bar. "The prodigal has come home and I feel like howlin'. Some folks don't feel like howlin,' maybe, but I do, and I'll bet I can name a gal that's feelin' the same way deep down inside, or will feel that way when she gets so she can feel again." His keen eyes were on Jed Repp's face.

"Did you see it?" Jed said.

Ritter nodded. "I seen it. Why didn't you kill him, son?" The blue eyes blazed with anger as he spoke. Jed Repp set his shot glass on the bar. "In the old days, somebody would have blown his liver out his backsides for the trick he tried to pull."

"I've been trying to tell you, Old Timer, that the old days are gone," Jed Repp said slowly. "This is not 1860. This is the turn of the century. I saw electric lights being demonstrated in San Antonio and I saw something they call a telephone in Austin."

"What the hell's that got to do with Ligett?" Sam Ritter blazed. "There ain't no electric lights in Ligett, nor tellyphones neither. Why'd you leave here in the first place, son?"

"You ask the damnedest questions! If anybody else—"

"You'd tell 'em to go to hell!" Sim Ritter snorted. "And so would I. Askin' hard questions is the privilege of old folks, son, especially when they rode the questionee on a boot saddle. I got another one. Did you and Susan quarrel? Was that why you left?"

"Partly," Jed Repp answered slowly. "She's got a temper as sharp as the edge of a razor and I've got a pride—"

"Stiffer'n a bull's tail on a frosty morning. I know about your pride, Jed. I knew your daddy. He had it too. Go on. You grew up with that gal, Jed. You oughta have knowed her temper and she oughta knowed your pride. Did your pride stick in your craw because she was Susan Newton?"

"I guess so," Jed Repp said uncomfortably. In any other man he would have resented these questions but Sim Ritter, somehow, seemed to have the right to ask them. For Sim Ritter was on his side, and he knew it. No matter what Sim Ritter said or how he said it, the old man was still on his side. "She didn't know how many acres of land she owned," he continued slowly. "She didn't know how many cows were carrying the B-N brand. And me," he shrugged, "what'd I have, a horse and two hands?"

"Big enough to hold a gun," Sim Ritter snorted. "You're a fool, son." There was no heat in his voice, no animosity, only sadness, and the understanding of pride and the futility of pride. "I don't blame you for feelin' that way, but you're lookin' at things from the wrong angle. Sure, she was

Susan Newton, and she had inherited the B-N, with more cows and land than she could count. She got 'em from old Bruck Newton and you know how *he* got 'em? I know. I helped him git some of 'em. He popped part of 'em out of the brush, he branded strays that wasn't really lost, he cut the little man's throat, he fought the big man tooth and toe nail, and he stole both blind. That's the way cattle kings are made, Jed, or that's the way they *was* made, and that's the way Bruck Newton made his pile. He didn't git respectable until *after* he got rich, son. Hey, Mack, set 'em up here again. And I'm payin' this time."

MACK RUSH came along the bar, set whiskey out. "I'm tellin' this younker the facts of life, Mack. Listen and see if you don't agree." Ritter repeated what he had just said. "You was here in Ligett, Mack, in them days, and ain't I tellin' the truth?"

Mack Rush nodded slowly. "That's about the way it was, Jed. The thieves was so thick they stole from each other and about all you can say for the man who won out was that he was just the biggest, and most successful, thief."

"There's an honest man talkin'," Sim Ritter said.

"That's what I've been telling you," Jed spoke. "Times have changed."

"'Not in Ligett, they ain't," Sim Ritter refuted.

"Even if you were right, I don't see what that has to do with Susan and me."

Sim Ritter's snort was a blast of sound that seemed to shake the saloon. "You said all you had was a horse and two hands, didn't you? That's all Old Bruck Newton had, except for a gun to go with the hands. She wouldn't want a better man than her old daddy was, and she wouldn't be likely to find one. If old Bruck was your friend, he was your friend come hell and high water. But that ain't here nor there. What did she care whether you owned any cows or a foot of land to pasture 'em? She had the cows, she had the land. It was you that she wanted, to hold the cows and the land for her when these modern thieves try to take 'em away from her, and to be a daddy to a bunch of towheads to fight for them cows and that land after you and her have finished fighting for 'em. Don't be a fool, son, a horse and two hands was enough, if she happened to love the guy who had 'em, and if the hands could hold a gun when the occasion warranted it."

"Do you think the occasion warrants it now?"

"I don't *think* it, I know it!" Sim Ritter answered. "Didn't I see her marry Harley Fox on the rebound, when you blew the country. She had some pride too, maybe too much, and when you let your pride stand in your way, she blew up like a thoroughbred that's lost its rider. She married him on the rebound and it was wrong from the beginning, it's wrong now, and it will be wrong until it's straightened out. Which was what she was goin' to do when she was headin' into the Antler saloon."

Jed Repp twisted uncomfortably at the bar.

"Why'd you come back here, son?" Sim Ritter demanded.

"Well—I wanted—"

"Bull wash! Don't tell me you just came back because you was hungry to see the old town! You came back here because you knew you'd been a fool and you came back to correct the mistake a fool had made. And you got back here and found her about to correct that same mistake, in the only way it can be corrected."

"I wouldn't say that's the only way."

"Well, I say it. I know Harley Fox

and he ain't worth the powder and lead to blow him to hell. He married her to get his hooks on the B-N spread. And he's got 'em on it. And he's not going to let go until he's blasted loose. And that's your job."

"Your knowledge and my knowledge are different," Jed Repp said. "You know it but I don't know it. When I pull the trigger on a gun, I've got to know I'm right."

Sim Ritter changed, his face softened. "So that's the way it is, son. Well, I wouldn't have any use for you if it was any other way. What I know and what Susan knows ain't enough. You've got to *know* yourself." He nodded, fiercely. "That's right. I know you've got to ride Harley Fox down or ride out of town, but you don't know it because he ain't done nothin' to you. Okay, son, go talk to him."

"That," Jed Repp answered, "is what I'm going to do. Here. Slip this in your pants pocket." He took the pistol he had taken from Susan from his pocket, handed it to Sim Ritter. The old man stared at the gun.

"Ain't you goin' to take that with you?" he asked.

Jed Repp shook his head. "If I had it, I might be tempted to use it, and I might be wrong. I got to know I'm right, Old Timer, and got to talk to Harley Fox before I know."

Understanding showed in Sim Ritter's bright blue eyes. "I see," he said softly.

Jed Repp turned and walked out of the Road to Ruin saloon. Sim Ritter watched him go, turned and spoke to Mack Rush. "Maybe I'm wrong, Mack. Maybe this younger generation has got more manhood in 'em than it looks like. But it shore is hell to have to let 'em solve their own problems when you can see the answer as plain as the nose on your face. Whiskey, Mack. And leave the bottle out on the bar this time."

JED Repp passed in front of the saddle shop, owned by Fred North, the butcher shop, run by fat Max Stengle and his two fat Dutch sons, he passed by Dirk's Photograph Gallery, run by frail, nervous Ed Dirk. He had been gone a year but these places were as familiar to him as if he had left only yesterday. The wooden sidewalks, the stores with their overhanging porches, the dusty street, the buggies and wagons on the street, the wooden hitching rails chewed for years by salt-hungry horses, all these things he remembered. They were the same, and yet they were changed. Or perhaps it was his eyes that had changed. Or perhaps the fact that he was going to the Antler saloon to talk to a man by the name of Harley Fox changed everything.

He swung the bat-wing doors wide, walked into the saloon. He recognized the bartender as the man who had sold him a drink when he had been here before. And the bartender recognized him. He saw the man's eyes narrow.

"I'm looking for Harley Fox," he said.

The bartender's eyes went down Jed Repp's body looking for a gun. "In the back room," he said, nodding. Harley Fox looked up at him when he opened the door of the room. Fox was sprawled in a chair at a poker table. A little-rat-faced man had been talking earnestly to him. "One way or another—" he was saying. He stopped abruptly as Jed Repp entered.

Surprise showed on the face of Harley Fox. "Damn you!" His chair scraped as he got to his feet and kicked it out of the way. The shiny pistol was holstered at his hip. His hand went to it but he did not attempt to draw the gun.

"I want to talk to you, Harley," Jed Repp said.

"I got nothing to say to you."

The little rat-faced man got quickly to his feet. "You Jed Repp?" he said.

"I am."

"Okay. I'll leave you and Harley to talk." He grinned, showing yellow fangs that had once been teeth, stepped toward the door.

"Harley—"

Lights exploded in Jed Repp's brain as the rat-faced man hit him in the back of the head with the butt of a gun. He stumbled forward, fell across the poker table, slid from it to the floor. He was unconscious before he stopped falling.

HIS first dazed thought was that the back of his head was going to split open. The grandfather of all headaches was whanging a hammer on an anvil in the back of his head. Consciousness returned slowly, a little at a time. He was aware of the headache first, then of the silence, then of the darkness, then of the odor. Then he remembered what had happened to him and sat up. His shirt was wet, wet with whiskey. The odor he smelled was the odor of whiskey. The fumes were so strong they almost nauseated him.

He got slowly to his feet, looked around him. He was in a cabin, of some kind, and he must have been unconscious for several hours, for night had fallen and he could see moonlight through cracks in the roof of the building. His legs were woozey, he put out a hand to steady himself, touched a bunk with rough blankets on it, touched a soft object lying on the bunk, a fur-covered object. His first thought was that some animal was sleeping on the bunk, a cat maybe. Then his fingers identified that fur as a muff and in something less than a second he forgot his jumping headache and the weakness in his legs.

"No!" he whispered. "No!"

His fingers fumbled across the blanket, touched a leg, then a body. He reached into his pockets for a match, found his matches and his knife were gone. There was a stir in the darkness and a dazed voice said weakly, "What —what happened?"

He dropped to his knees beside the bunk. "Who is it?" the voice said.

"Sue!" he whispered. "No. No!"

"Jed!" she gasped. "Jed!" Her hands clutched him as consciousness returned to her. "Where are we? What happened?"

"What happened to you?" he whispered.

"I was at home." She sounded confused, dazed. "A little after dark, I heard several horses approach. Someone called to me to come outside. I thought it was Harley. When I went outside a blanket was thrown over me. Jed, my clothes are all wet."

"Whiskey," he said.

"Whiskey?" she asked. "Why?"

"So it would look like we was drinking here. Sue We got to get out of this place, fast. Are you able to walk?"

"I'll try. Jed, do you mean that Harley brought us here?"

"I don't know who brought us here. All I know is we got to get away from here, fast." He lifted her from the bunk, walked across the room, stumbled over a bottle, cursed softly at the meaning of that bottle.

"Would Harley do this to us, Jed?" she whispered.

"It hasn't been done, yet." He set her on her feet, found the door, fumbled for the bar or lock. Once they got out of this cabin, the deadly trap set for them would go unsprung. But they had to move fast, faster than either of them had ever moved before. There was no bar on the inside of the door, and no

knob. He shoved against it. The door didn't budge.

He shoved again, harder this time. The door creaked. He hit it with his shoulder, smashing into it with all his strength. It did not open.

"Something's shoved against it on the outside," he panted.

"We can't get out?"

"We'll get out! Shh!" Outside in the night he could hear a horse trotting.

The horse went past the cabin, and stopped. Footsteps cautiously approached the door.

"Stand to one side," Jed Repp whispered.

"He'll have a gun, Jed."

"I've got a fist."

Outside he could hear a voice muttering. A rap sounded on the door.

"Jed?" a voice said. "Jed? Are you there, son?"

Sim Ritter's voice! Jed answered. From outside came the sound of furious activity. "Damned log as big as— Ugh!" There was a grunt and the sound of a heavy object falling. The door was jerked open. Moonlight flooded over Sim Ritter as he came into the room. "Jed, boy. You all right?"

"Right enough. How'd you know where I was?"

"I didn't. When you didn't come back I went up to the Antler lookin' for you. I was all pronged out for trouble but nobody in there would admit they had ever seen you. I waited around out back, keepin' out of sight. Just after dark I saw 'em bring a man out the back door and load him in a saddle. I figured it was you. I follered 'em but I lost 'em. I've been huntin'— What the devil's that?"

HE LOOKED over Jed's shoulder and drew back, his hands slapping the guns at his hips.

"It's me, Uncle Sim," Susan Fox said.

"You!" Black horror was in Sim Ritter's voice. "They brought you here too. The dirty—"

"Listen!" Jed Repp said.

Off in the night, he could hear horses running. "They're comin' back," Sim Ritter whispered.

"That's what I think," Jed Repp said. "Old Timer, give me one of your guns and take Sue out of here. Shove that log back against the door when you get outside."

"Jed! You're askin' for a gun!"

"I've learned myself what you tried to tell me. Give it to me."

"And give me one too," the girl spoke.

"Susan!" Jed Repp rapped.

"They brought me here, I'm staying here," she answered. The unanswerable tones of old Bruck Newton himself were strong in her voice. "Uncle Sim, give me that gun."

"Two damned fools!" Sim Ritter gritted. "We'll all three stay."

"You can't stay. You've got to go outside and put that log back. Give me that gun and move."

For an instant, while the pound of hoofs grew louder, old Sim Ritter hesitated. Then he pulled one gun from a holster, handed it to Jed Repp, took a second one from his pocket, handed it to the girl. "It's yours anyhow. I remember the day when your mammy put a bullet through a holdup—"

"Move!" Jed Repp said.

Sim Ritter went out the door, slammed it shut. They could hear him grunt as he moved the log back into position.

"I don't know who those horsemen are," Jed Repp said. "But you get back against the side wall and lay down."

"But—"

"If I miss you can finish the job I couldn't do." He heard her move across the cabin and lie down. Outside horses

were sawed to a halt. A voice that Jed Repp remembered as belonging to the little rat-faced man said, "Here it is, Harley."

Jed Repp stiffened. Harley Fox was out there. Harley Fox had either planned this or had acquiesced in the plan. Either way it made no difference.

"You sure my wife is in there?" Harley Fox said.

A laugh was the answer. "We're middlin' sure of it. All you got to do is go in. They're both drunk and they're in a cabin together. Ain't a jury on earth will convict you for shootin' both of them."

Harley Fox's laugh was forced and shrill. "She always was soft on him," he said.

"You'll get the B-N and nobody will ever know you had a single thing to do with 'em being here," the voice of the rat-faced man continued. "Our story will be that we saw your wife and this Repp hombre go into this cabin. Since we thought you ought to know about such a thing, we went and told you. We found you in the Antler saloon and you got witnesses that we found you there. That's all there is to it, Harley."

"Did you hear that?" the girl whispered.

"I heard it," Jed Repp answered.

He heard the grunt as the men lifted the log away from the door. I stood just inside the cabin, gun down at his side. The door swung open. Harley Fox ducked his head through the doorway and looked in.

"Come shooting, Harley," Jed Repp said.

AT THE sound of his voice, Fox snatched up the gun he was holding in his hand. Jed Repp put two bullets through him and the man fell backward, sprawling full length in the moonlight. Jed Repp stepped out the doorway. The moon was bright on the surprised face of the rat-faced man, bright on his hand as he grabbed for a gun. Jed Repp put two bullets through him before he could get the gun out of its holster. There was a third man, the bartender from the Antler saloon. The bartender took one look at the grim figure that had come stalking out of the cabin where he had expected to find a defenseless man and woman and started running. Repp put a bullet through his leg and the bartender screamed and sprawled on the ground. Sim Ritter, yelling, big gun in his hand, came running up. And Susan Fox was coming out of the door behind him.

Ritter looked at him and at the girl and at the bodies on the ground, shoved his own gun back into its holster. "You see what kind of a spot false pride can git you in, Jed. If you hadn't been a damned fool with a hide full of pride a year ago you wouldn't be so damned close to dead right now."

"What's this about pride?" the girl spoke slowly.

Sim Ritter turned fiercely to her. "The damned fool said you had more cows than you could count. Said he didn't have nothin' but a horse and two hands. Said he couldn't ask you to marry him because—"

Jed Repp saw her eyes were on him. "Was that why you quarreled with me, why you went away?"

"That's right, Sue," he answered slowly. "I didn't know any better."

She turned to Sim Ritter. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him that all the daughter of old Bruck Newton would ever want from a man would be a horse and two hands, if she loved him and he loved her."

"He's right, Jed," the girl said to the tall and silent man standing beside her. "I'm old Bruck's daughter."

Jed Repp nodded. "I know," he said softly. "And I'm glad."

"Git away from here, you two!" Sim Ritter snarled fiercely. "A couple of horses are tied down there within a hundred yards. They had to leave the horses here to try to prove you had come to the cabin of your own free will. Use 'em to git away from here. I'll clean up this mess. Move!"

They walked away, walked slowly toward the horses. Old Sim Ritter watched them go. They went out of sight in the moonlight. That was the way he would always remember them, walking away from a cabin that had been a death trap, walking away without looking back. They were gone. He looked at the body of Harley Fox on the ground. "Danged young puppy!" he said. "In my day, you'd never have got started on this kind of business. Somebody would have et you for breakfast sure. Not that," he stared in the direction in which the man and the woman had disappeared. "Not that one of these modern kids didn't do a damned good job of eatin' you for breakfast, once he had got his mind made up it was the thing to do."

SITTING BULL'S SUN DANCE

★ By LEE FRANCES ★

SITTING BULL PRAYED TO HIS GODS FOR VICTORY—
THEN THE BATTLE OF LITTLE BIG ROCK!

THE Sun Dance was full of significance for the Indians. A famous one was that which Chief Sitting Bull danced to make good a vow which he had sworn to God, or Wakan Tanka, in a prayer for his people; at the end of the dance he prophesied the victory which the Indians had over General Custer and his men.

Sitting Bull took very seriously his obligations to protect and care for his people. At a time when the advancing white men were killing and driving away the game which the Indians needed, and encroaching upon lands which treaties had given to the red men alone, Sitting Bull made a great prayer to Wakan Tanka for mercy and aid for the Indians. He took three men with him as witnesses, and went to the top of a huge butte one day at noon.

In humility, he loosened his braids, removed from his face the red paint which he ordinarily wore, and took the feathers from his head. Facing the sun, holding up a filled pipe, he prayed for game, strength and happiness for his people. He vowed that he would, in consideration of the granting of this prayer, give to Wakan Tanka a whole buffalo, and also that he would perform the Sun Dance for two days and nights. The four men then smoked the pipe together, and returned to camp.

Sitting Bull first made good his vow by killing a fat buffalo, which he stretched out upon the ground as an offering to God. Then the Sun Dance was arranged. The camp was arranged in a big circle, so that all the people could watch. Sitting Bull had danced the Sun Dance many times, and his body bore the marks of the torture which was considered necessary to prove bravery and endurance. This time he decided to give one hundred pieces of skin.

There was elaborate ritual to go through in connection with the dance. A sacred tree was cut, representing the body of the enemy, and carried into the circle on poles. An altar was set up, a buffalo skull placed on it, a scaffold and a pipe put in front. Everything had symbolism and deep meaning to the Indians, and the whole was conducted with reverence and sincerity.

His father, Jumping Bull, had the honor of cutting the skin from Sitting Bull, who sat leaning against the sacred tree. Using a sharp awl and a knife, beginning at the wrists and working up the arms, he cut out small bits of skin, the size of a match head. This ordeal lasted only about half an hour, so swiftly and surely did Jumping Bull work at cutting the hundred pieces. Sitting Bull never winced or acknowledged any pain, but kept up a continual wailing to Wakan Tanka for mercy to the people.

Then, gazing at the Sun, with the blood running from his arms, Sitting Bull began to bob up and down in the Sun Dance. All day he danced, and all night, and into the next day, the crowd of his countrymen watching him all the time. Sometime during the second day he became faint, and hardly able to stand. Some of the chiefs took him and laid him down, and he became unconscious. They revived him with cold water, and as his eyes opened, he began speaking.

He had a Vision, he said, and his people listened in awe as he told them of the prophesy he had received. It was that soldiers were coming into the camp, upside down, and falling.

The people were very joyful. They knew that the prophecy meant that when the soldiers came, they would be able to vanquish them. Wakan Tanka would care for them.

The Sun Dance ended. It was June 14, 1876. Eleven days later occurred the famous battle of the Little Big Horn, in which Custer and his soldiers met disaster at the hands of Sitting Bull and his people.

CUSTER'S DEFEAT

By LEE FRANCES

CUSTER'S HEROISM WILL LIVE FOREVER!

THE worst defeat ever suffered by white men at the hands of Indians was the wiping out of General Custer and his men in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. The army, and in fact the whole country, was shocked and humiliated by the massacre.

Custer was the idol of the nation, a figure of gallantry and daring in the popular imagination. Fortune had smiled upon him all his life, and he had a reputation for success and good luck.

As he rode to his last battle, Custer commanded a regiment of the finest cavalry in the world, five hundred and fifty gallant horsemen. He probably had no doubt that his force was more than a match for the whole Sioux nation. With all his experience, he underestimated the cunning and desperation of the Indians, and the sagacity of their leader, Sitting Bull.

June 24, 1876. Custer came upon the trail of some Sioux, and hastened to catch up to them. He thought he had them in a trap.

June 25. He divided his men into three groups, one commanded by himself, one by Major Benteen, and the third by Major Reno. They separated to encircle the Indians. They didn't know they were running straight into a vast encampment of many tribes, on the banks of the Little Big Horn River.

Suddenly the Indians were everywhere, whooping their terrible war cry. The soldiers had walked into a trap, and were utterly, completely surprised. Savage hand-to-hand fighting continued through that day. The next dawn the survivors were attacked again. Firing continued through most of the second day, and then the Indians abruptly marched away. Their scouts had told them that a great column of soldiers were arriving as reinforcements.

Now the toll of the dead could be taken. Custer was dead, and all but one of his immediate command was dead. The one fortunate man who escaped was the trumpeter, who had been despatched with a note to Major Benteen asking for reinforcements. A great many of Benteen's and Reno's men were also dead.

The terrible defeat made the government and the army determined to end once and for all the menace of the Indians. They went about that task resolutely.

As for the Indians, they seemed to think they had taught the white men a lesson, that of leaving the Indians' hunting grounds alone. Besides, they were tired of fighting, temporarily at least. Their great assemblage broke up, and drifted apart into separate bands. This made it easy for the hard-riding generals to hunt them down.

The Indians' greatest victory had been their last great stand against the white men. Less than a year after that terrible massacre, the long reign of the Sioux over the Plains country was over.

* * *

READ AMAZING STORIES AND FANTASTIC ADVENTURES!
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Haig and Carder were caught flat-footed!

VALLEY of BETRAYAL

by H. B. Livingston

Haig and Carder were two smart crooks, as smart as they come. And they had no scruples—even killing—but, like crooks, they forgot . . .

THEY were dropped off at Tomas, on the edge of Death Valley, by the stage that came down from Nevada on its way to Scranton. Most of Tomas was asleep in the heat of the late May sun but there was a fair turnout to celebrate the arrival of the stage. Those who had braved the heat were rewarded by a sight they would not soon forget.

"Whoa!" the driver roared.

He leaned back on the brake as his stage jolted to a sliding stop behind the horses. His voice was as dry as the cloud of alkali dust that obscured the vehicle he drove. When the dust settled there were two men who got out.

In its day Tomas had seen more than one tenderfoot. But never had it seen a pair as green as these. Neither of the two was more than twenty-one, by the looks of them, and the lack of growth on their faces indicated that they either shaved often or were even younger than they appeared.

"Holy smoke," Ames the storekeeper whispered, and then he cursed in mild amazement.

The curse drifted around the small circle of weather beaten men beside the stage. They looked up at the driver and he grinned down at them in agreement. His shotgun guard raised a pair of alkali whitened eyebrows and shook his head, as though still unable to believe what he had been riding with for more than a hundred miles.

Then a small pile of luggage which included two hand trunks landed in the street, the horses shook the last of the water from their sweating muzzles, the driver and guard wiped dirty sleeves across their own mouths. The driver's voice rose in another shout.

"Hey!" A bull-whip snaked out over the horses' backs and cracked sharply. "Hey!"

It has been a longer stop than was usually made at Tomas. Time was money, as far as the company was concerned, and Scranton was still a long way off. Acrid dust swirled into the air as the stage lurched forward, and when it had settled Tomas had another look at its two guests.

"I say," the taller of the two said.

He was a reedy blond fellow. Under a travel cape he wore a five-button green jacket with a belt that ran all around. His cap was checkered tweed and it was soaked through. Sweat ran down his face and under his stiff collar.

Ames the storekeeper answered because the young fellow seemed to be looking at him. Ames was shrewd and thin to the point of emaciation and had learned to take it easy in the heat.

"You say what?"

"This is Tomas, isn't it?"

"Last I heard." No use wasting words. They must have paid fare to Tomas and this was where they had been tossed out. Then why ask foolish questions?

THE young fellow sniffed and his sharp nose grew thinner. He looked around. There wasn't much to see. A few whitened shacks on an almost white street. Four burros dozing before a saloon. A group of grizzled men in front of a ramshackle general store. That was Tomas.

"Is there any place we can put up?" the young fellow said.

"Huh?"

"He means, is there a hotel?"

That was the shorter one, huskier and darker but with the same sound to his voice and the same look in his eyes. He was staring boldly at Ames and the others, and although he was shorter than most he seemed to be looking down at them. He too wore a heavy belted suit and a cap but carried his cape over his arm.

"Yeah," Ames muttered. "A place to put up! Try the saloon."

He and the others watched the two young men gather up their baggage and drag it across the street. No one made a move to help them, which was unusual because Tomas was not an unfriendly town. But the feeling was somehow in the air that these two weren't the kind to be friendly with common men.

"Well I'll be dipped," Ames said. "I'll be dipped." He shook his head and spat a wad of tobacco juice into the street.

In an instant the spot of wetness was coated by hot dust. Ames raised his eyes from the street and jerked his head toward the store. Most of the others followed him through the door and into its comparative coolness.

Only Mort Carder and Wally Haig remained outside, and neither of them was grinning as they walked down to a shady spot next to a shack.

"What do you think?" Carder asked as soon as they had got themselves settled against a wall.

Next to him the burly Haig rubbed a thick hand over a face as scarred and gullied and eroded as the land around Tomas. It was a face that told a story, an evil story.

"A man canna always tell," he said thoughtfully. "But I doot not they ha' money betwixt them. And a downy pair they are. Ready for the plucking."

Mort Carder made suggestive motions with his hands, as though he had them around a man's neck. He was bowlegged, swarthy and middle aged, and when he leered a white scar showed against the length of his right cheek.

"Ready money," he agreed. "That's the way they look to me. And once we've got it this blasted hole won't see no more of us."

CARDER and his partner, the husky Scot, were almost as out of place in Tomas as the two dudes who had come off the stage. Both men had made their way into the town over the Funeral mountains to the east, which was almost as bad a trip as one through the desert.

In a country where most of the scattered inhabitants used burros, these two rode horses. That the horses were good ones was a matter of luck, since they had stolen the first ones that came to hand and had barely beaten the posse out of Arizona. Tomas asked no questions although they were plainly not prospectors.

The truth was that they were nothing in particular, and Death Valley gold hunters least of all since both had a fear of the burning wastes which had kept them penned in Tomas. In their time Haig and Carder had punched cattle both by day and by night. Each could do a fair job of branding with a running iron or even a cinch ring, and the owl hoot trail had led them many places.

Haig had landed in Flagstaff and was trying to drum up a poker game with some troopers in a saloon when Carder had drifted into the place. Neither man had ever seen or heard of the other before.

SOME philosopher once said that if two fools wandered separately into a gathering of a thousand wise men, the two would recognize each other as though by magic. It may be that way with thieves also. At any rate there was no need of spoken words. A glance passed between Carder and Haig and that was enough. Get the soldiers drunk and put them in the middle and split the winnings afterward.

It had worked very well until the end of the first week of their partnership. Haig and Carder got along fine with each other. Then a drunken soldier had caught Carder slipping the Scot a wink.

The soldier went down with two bullets in him!

But the eye is faster than the hand. The soldier had gone down with two bullets in him, one from each man's gun.

With their own horses stabled there had been no choice but to grab the first two at hand. Then, with a charge of horse stealing added to that of murder, they had fled blindly.

Of their own volition the two would never have come to Tomas. The heat was oppressive and opportunities in their line were few. After a short time most of their money was gone, washed down their throats in bad whisky. Their skill at cards earned them a few dollars, but not much. Prospectors drifted in to Tomas and replenished their packs and talked about legendary hoards of gold but when it came to the point none had more than a bit of dust in his pouch.

To go back over the Funerals was impossible. Haig and Carder had considered skirting the Panamints but the prospect at that time of year was unpleasant. So they had waited.

"Might turn out to be a lucky break we stuck around," Carder said.

"The Fates have strange ways belike," Haig agreed. "A man does well to keep his eyes open."

"What about tonight? They'll probably be asleep. You can give me a boost up the saloon wall. Once we're in the room there won't be nothing to it."

Carder's hands twisted again and they were big and strong enough to have taken care of the dudes even without Haig's assistance. The Scot cocked his head in thought. And shook it from side to side.

"I see no deeficulty with them. But yon innkeeper is a sly one and I think sleeps lightly. Another day's waiting would do no harm."

Carder had to go along on that. No use taking unnecessary chances. He was a rash man, quick with his temper and his gun, and therefore appreciated Haig's caution even more than was warranted. For Haig was not one to be trusted.

WHEN the two dudes emerged from the saloon the next morning they headed straight across the street for the general store. Both were in shirt sleeves, a concession to the already blistering sun, but their collars were buttoned and their ties knotted.

Along with most of the permanent and transient population, Haig and Carder watched the two cross and then drifted along behind them into the store. As on the day before, the taller young man took the lead.

"We will be needing some things," he told Ames.

The storekeeper made way on his littered counter for his sharp elbows. "I got things," he said cautiously.

THE young fellows swept the cluttered place with haughty stares. Flour had spilled around an open barrel and there were white footprints all over the floor. Rope and picks and shovels and pans lay in disorder along the walls. Water jugs and canteens hung from nails. And an asstortment of sun-dried, desert-scarred overalled men did not bother to hide curiosity.

"I see you have," the blond fellow said coldly. "We will need equipment for mining gold."

"You figger to do some prospectin' around here?" Ames asked incredulously.

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

Ames had a notion to tell him where to go. But Ames was not totally unkind. And to let these two wander into the Valley was just plain murder!

"Now, just a minute, young feller," he said. "I don't reckon you know just what you're gettin' into."

He looked around for corroboration

and saw a grizzled prospector inch forward. Ames crooked a finger at him.

"Sam here has been workin' this territory for years," Ames continued. "He can tell you what it's like."

"He hasn't been working it very intelligently, from the looks of him," the young fellow said. "Or very profitably, either."

Reaching into his pocket, he drew out a sheet of paper folded into a small rectangle. Unfolded, the paper proved to be some sort of map. The dude laid the map on the counter and beckoned to Sam.

"What I want to know is whether this map is accurate," he said.

Sam looked at the map and shook his gray head and tugged at the lobe of his ear. There were all kinds of markings on the paper but he couldn't read them. He admitted as much.

"These are the Funeral Mountains," the young fellow pointed out. He turned the map so it was oriented properly. "Here is Death Valley and on the other side the Panamints. Is that correct?"

"Wal what do you know?" Sam asked in amazement as he caught on. Once he had the idea he sailed ahead. He had to admit that as far as he knew the map had everything in the right place.

"And there is admittedly gold in this area?" It took Sam a minute to unscramble that question.

"You don't think I'd traipse all over that infernal desert for somethin' I didn't believe was there, do you?" he shouted.

The dude was paying him no attention. He had turned to his shorter companion.

"You get the point, don't you, John? He's been traipsing all over the desert, as he says. But can't even read a map. Now do you wonder they never find anything?"

"It is rich," the dark one grinned.

"Wait a minute," Ames interrupted. "You fellers figger you're goin' to step in and just shovel up the stuff when men like Sam haven't had no luck at all?"

"It is not a matter of luck, as we see it. Geologically speaking, these prospectors are ignorant. Gold is not where you find it, you know. It is where prehistoric streams have put it, or faults in the earth's structure."

Ames missed out on most of the speech. But he caught the part about the prospectors being ignorant and his face turned red. He had said all he was going to say. These two fools could look out for themselves if they were so smart.

"What do you want to buy?" he grunted.

"First of all some picks," the dude said. "How much are they?"

"Ten dollars each." It was double what he would have charged anyone else.

SHOVELS were added, and rope. Ames suggested dynamite and caps and his suggestion was taken up. He was beginning to get some fun out of this and he dredged up every item he could think of. A pile mounted.

"You'll be needing food," he reminded.

His price on salt pork and flour and salt and the rest was high but he saw to it that they had enough for a long journey. And he made sure they bought enough water jugs to keep them from dying of thirst. The piles on the floor and the counter grew higher. He sold them hats and he sold them boots.

"You two got guns?" he said at last.

That was another item. Ames had a pair of rifles, hand made weapons with plenty of silver inlay. He was glad to sell them and they, at least, were worth

what he charged. He had no horses to sell, or burros either, but he knew where he could get three good burros.

"Guess that's all," Ames said when he could think of nothing more. The onlookers held their breath while he laboriously added up the bill. The two dudes paled when they heard it.

The contents of their two bulging pocketbooks were barely enough to pay the total. Ames had been harsh. But in his mind he was already deducting enough to pay their fares back to whereever they had come from. He had no doubt they would be going back, if they lived. If they died they wouldn't need the money anyway.

He and Sam showed them how to reach that part of the Panamints which they had decided was most likely looking. Ames advised strongly against crossing the Valley and told the dudes to start at night and circle the edge of the mountains. Then he went out and got the burros and helped load them and wished the two young men good luck.

Tomas turned out in a body that evening to see the dudes off. And again there were only two who were not smiling.

"I knew we should have got them last night," Carder cursed.

"It may be no great misfortune," Haig hazarded. "Money alone is not enough. Those packs carry sufficient food to take us over yon hills. And those burros and the rifles and the rest may be sold for a tidy sum when we reach our destination."

Carder's mean eyes lit up. "You're no fool, Wally. We'll start after them tonight."

"Whoosht, man! And bare our intent? Give them time. We know where they go. And we can cross the Valley in a night while they take days to go around. Small risk and a fair profit."

He dug an elbow into Carder's ribs and let loose an evil laugh. If the dudes were ever found there might be no one to think of connecting their deaths with him and Carder. Killing was all right, but a man could use his head too.

FIVE nights later Carder and Haig were ready to leave. The dudes would already be unpacking their equipment in a canyon across the Valley. It was the furnace winds that held Haig and his partner back.

Old timers warned the two men not to leave that night. Something in the air foretold danger. Haig considered the matter gravely and his seamed face grew cautious.

"They're crazy, plain crazy from grubbin' after gold," Carder argued. "I don't believe in their furnace winds any more than in the yellow stuff they say is out there. Let's go."

The truth was that he was afraid. It had taken a good deal of effort to nerve himself for the trip across Death Valley. Now he was ready to go and fearful that delay might cause him to change his mind.

"E'en so I doubt their tales of gold, they may yet know something," Haig counselled. As usual he won.

AND at midnight the winds came, first with a gentle stirring and then with a sudden roar. Hot as a blast from a furnace they swirled down Death Valley. Poisonous gases made them doubly dangerous, and then there was sand and dust and particles of salt that could cut a man's face to ribbons. Carder shivered and even Haig turned gray around the mouth. This was not their kind of country and the sooner they were out of it the better.

In the morning the wind was down. Some of the scenery had changed but there was no improvement. All day the sunlight was muddy and at night the

moon looked orange. When they left, Ames claimed it was cooler, but the difference between one hundred and twenty degrees and ten points less was hardly appreciable.

By eleven o'clock the two men had their horses ready and plenty of water in their canteens, and soon after midnight they left. They claimed to be riding north toward the Nevada border but they were no more than ten miles out of Tomas when they left the road and cut diagonally southwest across the Valley.

If it had been hot outside, it was hotter yet on the broken flats. They had to be careful. The crusty salt surface broke through here and there.

"I don't like this," Carder said. "Not one bit I don't like this."

"Less than fifty miles," Haig cheered him. "Come sunup we'll be out of it."

Fright, more than heat, made Carder gasp. At first there had been an eerie stillness to the air, as on the night before, and it had them worried. When the hot breeze came it lifted their fear but made them tie their kerchiefs across their noses and mouths.

When the horses began to wheeze the men gave them water and took some themselves. Not too much, though. Water was life, and while they thought nothing of taking another man's they valued their own much too highly.

Salt crust gave way to other elements. In some places the ground was hard and lined with deep cracks. As the moon sank behind the Panamints they had to ride carefully. Once, in the darkness, they felt water slosh around them. It was a poisoned, evil smelling pool, and they skirted wide and kept the horses' heads up.

Their ride was slower than they had expected. Sunrise found them just beginning to come up off the floor of the Valley. Here the ground was a jumble of rocks through which they picked their way. But far to the right was a peak which told them they had ridden straight.

Rising over the Funeral Mountains to the east, the blast of the sun caught them between rocky walls. The heat was deadly. They could almost feel the water draining from their bodies. But they had plenty to take them into the greener hills still far beyond.

"I thought it'd be cooler here," Carder complained. It seemed as though they had got off the floor of an oven only to be caught on its walls.

"No hotter for us than if we'd stayed in Tomas and mayhap been o'ertaken by some stray troops," Haig observed.

The thought helped a little. Trouble with a sheriff they were accustomed to; but the arm of local law was short, while that of the U. S. Army reached everywhere. And men who had killed a soldier could expect short shrift.

"Think, too, of the booty," the Scot went on. "We stand to make a better haul than any of these desert rats with all their digging."

BUT even he was affected by the sun. He stopped talking to put up an arm in order to shield his eyes against the glare reflected from the rocks around them. Heat shimmered up and made them blink constantly. In the shade of a great boulder they paused for a sip of water. Then they reined around it and prepared to climb another barren rise.

And almost missed their prey.

For coming straight at them were the two dudes, spurring their three burros ahead in insane disregard of the temperature. Only the fact that the men on the burros faced directly into the sun kept them from seeing Carder and Haig below.

"Back!" Carder snapped.

Haig was a little too slow in turning. The two horses collided. They lost their chance to get back into the shelter of the great rock. Another moment and the men above had seen them.

Even so there was nothing to frighten the pair above. Yet with the swiftness of a couple of scared rabbits they brought their burros to a halt. The blond one let out a high yell.

"What's the matter with them?" Carder spat. He cursed violently. Then he tried a reassuring call.

It was no good. The long-eared animals above were already turning and scrambling back over the crest of the slope. And no amount of guile was going to persuade their owners to stop them.

Haig was as angry as his partner but he wasted no breath in swearing. As he spurred his horse upward his mind was busy. Something had made the dudes inordinately wary of other men. Haig wondered what it could have been.

When they came over the top of the rise and caught sight of the dudes, they had gained enough ground to put them within shooting distance. Carder unlimbered his gun but Haig struck it down.

"Ye may hit one of the burros," he explained. He noted with satisfaction that the three animals were as well loaded as the day they had left Tomas.

Another mile and Haig and Carder had pulled to within fifty yards. The men ahead turned white faces backward. They hadn't a chance to get away and they knew it. In their blind fear they made matters worse by riding into ground so broken that they were slowed to a walk.

The blond fellow had lost his head completely. His darker companion showed better. In that moment of mortal fear his mind still worked. He remembered the rifles Ames had sold them. Desperately he yanked his from his pack and whirled about.

Haig and Carder were caught flat-footed. They had completely forgotten the rifles. Now it was their turn to have the color drain from their faces. They were close enough to see the finger tighten on the trigger.

Nothing happened! Still bereft of the power of moving they watched open mouthed as the young fellow pulled the trigger again and again. It was Haig who caught on first.

"He forgot to load it!" he shouted joyously.

Hysterical laughter boomed from him and was echoed by Carder. What made the situation seem even funnier to them was the fact that the young fellow didn't stop trying to fire the empty gun. He remained on one knee, pumping away at the trigger, until Haig rode up and calmly shot him between the eyes.

The blond one was running crazily, directly into the sun. He had a canteen slung over his shoulder and it kept banging against his back. Carder took careful aim and put a bullet through the canteen.

Water spurted, clear at first and then tinged with pink. The bullet had gone through. The blond fellow staggered. He turned slowly, an uncomprehending look on his face. The realization that he was dying came slowly.

Then was his last remaining strength he dug something from his pocket and flung it away from him. His eyes followed it as it fell and rolled into a crevice filled with stones and rubble. Like a sapling in a rising gale he swayed, shivered. Blood gushed from his mouth as he toppled.

IN A matter of minutes Haig and Carder stripped the two dead men of every article of value. There was a

hundred dollars in cash, two fine gold watches to divide.

"Vurra nice," Haig chuckled. "They have done well by us."

"Yeah," Carder agreed. He was satisfied but still anxious. "Now let's get going." Haig held up a hand.

"Consider, now. Do you remember but that they set out for gold. We should ha' found them hard at work wi' pick and shovel. Instead, we came on them as they made tracks back to Tomas."

He wiped sweat from his forehead and stared at Carder. Both of them were soaked from their exertion. They should have been on their way already. But Haig ran a rough hand over his stubbed jaw and his eyes were suddenly greedy.

"And did ye note how yon laddie flung something among those rocks?" he mused. "Think on it, Mort."

"You figger they might have found something? You think there's a chance there might really be gold around here?"

"You have struck my notion exactly," Haig said.

The thought was almost dizzying. It was one thing to laugh at the desert rats when they came back empty-handed. But a real strike was another matter. They had heard a great deal about the yellow metal that was supposed to lie in these wastes. Enough to make a man rich beyond belief. No more need to run a few head of cattle over the border on dark nights, or to risk their lives in a crooked card game.

"I'm for having a look," Carder said.

He and Haig took a jug from one of the packs and drank their fill of water. With the temperature at one hundred and thirty degrees where they stood, the water almost ran out through their pores. But for a while they were not thirsty.

Like crazy men they scrambled among the rocks. Not knowing exactly what they were seeking, their difficulty was the greater. Both men thought that the thrown object had landed near the beginning of the crevice. But the hard ground ran downward here, and there was the possibility that it had rolled.

The crack was not deep, but seven or eight feet wide. Stones lay everywhere in it, and as the two men began their search they loosened several which rolled away from them.

Sharp edges of rock cut into their fingers as they picked over the stones. Neither Carder nor Haig paid any attention to the minor cuts. Nor were they more heedful of the sun, now high above Death Valley. Had they looked down at the arid waste only slightly below them they would have seen no living thing moving across its surface.

But even whiskey is not as important to a drunkard as is gold to a thief. Haig and Carder had killed without mercy for a stake no greater than a thousand dollars. What if Fate had thrown a gold mine in their laps?

IT WAS Carder who found the chunk of rock. It was half as big as his fist, and more metal than stone. It flashed yellow in the sunlight, brighter even than the golden sun itself. Haig snatched the rock from Carder's hands.

"I knew it," he whispered. "And do I remember rightly they had a map."

Almost running, he started up the slope, Carder at his heels. Feverishly they went through the dead men's pockets once more. The blond fellow had had the gold, and it turned out that he had the map too. The folded paper was the only thing left in his wallet.

"There it is," Carder pointed as Haig unfolded the map. "They marked the place. I'll bet they were rushing to

It was Carder who found the chunk of rock. It was half as big as his fist, and more metal than stone

stake a claim." He laughed. "We can take care of that for them."

It was then that he felt the first effects of the heat. In his mouth his tongue was suddenly cold. He swayed.

Haig looked at him. The Scot's eyes were narrowed to slits. His mind worked swiftly.

"Are those soldiers, there?" he said. His thick finger pointed beyond Carder.

"Where?" Carder asked. He spun around.

Haig's fist caught him between the shoulder blades and sent him sprawling forward onto his face.

"Not there." Haig said. "I willna be needing your help to file the claim or dig the gold, Mort."

In one hand he held the chunk of golden ore. His other hand had already drawn his gun. Carder's weapon had fallen from his holster and was out of his reach. He was on his hands and knees, looking up at Haig.

"You're fooling, Wally. You wouldn't shoot your own friend."

"As soon as another. Considering especially that I would ha' been where you are now had you thought of this first. But then your wits were never over swift."

"Fast enough," Carder grunted.

His right hand shot upward and loosed a fistful of dust and gravel in Haig's eyes. In the same motion Carder threw himself forward. Haig's shot went over his head.

Before Haig could fire again Carder

was on him. Half blinded, the Scot had only the advantage of the weapon. He lost that when Carder's flying fist knocked it from his hand.

They fought viciously, using their feet as much as their hands. Refusing to relinquish his hold on the gold-streaked rock, Haig clubbed with it at Carder's head. Carder came inside the arc of the blow and ripped his fingers across Haig's face, gouging at the Scot's eyes.

Screaming with pain and totally unable to see, Haig swung wildly. Both men had lost their hats in the struggle and now fought bareheaded beneath the terrible sun. That sun was Carder's undoing. It drained him of strength and put a red haze before his eyes. He stumbled as he charged forward.

The rock in Haig's hand landed on Carder's temple and dropped him like a poled steer. Haig fell on top of him, swung the rock again and again with all his strength until even in his blindness he knew Carder was dead.

THEN the reaction came. Worse than loss of blood or the pain in his gouged eyes were the fingers of flame that seemed to be licking at Haig's head. His breath scorched the lining of his throat. He had to get water or die.

Lust for gold had robbed Haig of his caution. Now it was need of water that took from him the power to think. He ran blindly, and in his blindness ran directly away from the burros who still waited a few yards away. He licked the blood that ran from his eyes. Reason ebbed fast.

"Mort!" he croaked, forgetting he had just killed his partner. "Mort! You wouldna refuse a man a drink?"

Silence increased his fear. He listened intently. Were those hoofbeats in the distance? He had tricked Mort with a mention of soldiers. Perhaps there were some about. Haig crawled in the direction from which the sound seemed to come.

He still held the golden rock in one hand. It had betrayed him and Carder but he would not let it go. Even when the thirst grew overwhelming and he began to dig for water with his fingers he still clutched it.

In his madness it seemed to him that the dust in which he grubbed was water. He lifted a handful and put it in his mouth. It was the last action of Wally Haig.

In his last delirium Haig had been right about one thing. The hoofbeats he had heard were real. A file of mounted men led by a grizzled prospector moved slowly over the rocks. They were guided by the shot Haig had fired. When they found Haig he was a much thinner man than the description they had of him.

But he was still recognizable. The Captain leaned out of his saddle and looked around. The story was a plain one, not hard to read. He took a swig of water before he spoke slowly and feelingly.

"Falling out among thieves, I suppose. But it's them all right. Well, no use taking their bodies in. We'll pull into some shade and wait until dark and bury them."

As the file of mounted men moved toward shelter the Captain saw his guide take something from Haig's hand. He waited for the old prospector to come even with him.

"I wondered what they fought over. Was that it?"

"I reckon not," the prospector said as he threw the rock away. "Nobody would fight over this. It's just iron pyrites. We call it Fool's Gold."

THE END

CORONADO'S EXPEDITION

By JON BARRY

The cruelty of the *Conquistadores* is shown by Coronado's expedition

Coronado's men traveled in an impressive and powerful array. The flashing of sunlight on glittering steel, and the clank of metal accoutrements amazed the brave but simple Indians

IN MEXICO CITY in the sixteenth century there were fantastic stories current concerning vast wealth to be found in the North. Indian cities of golden splendor were there, it was rumored, where houses were encrusted with turquoise, and even dishes were made of gold. In 1539, one Fray Marcos de Niza was sent by the Viceroy to investigate these stories.

He traveled northward, until in the distance he saw the pueblo village of Hawikuh. He probably viewed it clothed in the brilliance of a setting sun, the splendor of the sight possibly intensified by mirage. Without investigating further, he returned home, convinced that he had found the wealthy land which he sought.

An army was organized, guided by Fray Marcos, and commanded by Don Francisco Vasquez de Coronado. They marched expectantly northward, planning to secure land and gold for Spain, and heathen souls for the church, for everywhere the Spanish conquerors went, one of their objectives was to convert the natives to Christianity. Hawikuh was reached and taken by force, but there was no gold in the adobe buildings there. Nor did they find gold for the taking anywhere during their journey, though they explored the land from the Colorado River to the Kansas prairies.

They returned to the Rio Grande and established winter quarters. Though the priests with the expedition were sincere in their efforts to convert the Indians, the disappointed soldiers did more harm than the priests were able to do good. The arrogance and cruelty of the soldiers roused the Indians to revolt. One of Coronado's captains, in reprisal, had two hundred of the Indians butchered and burned. This sort of treatment planted in the natives a horror and hatred of white men that burned for generations, which made martyrs of many priests who attempted to minister to the Indians, and made further exploration difficult.

Coronado and his men had to return to Mexico without the gold they had sought so buoyantly, disheartened and discredited. In their venturesome journey they had done far more harm to the cause of Spain and the church than they had done good.

NO INHERITANCE

By BARRY CRALE

THE MOJAVE INDIANS HAD NO TROUBLE WITH GOVERNMENT INHERITANCE TAXES!

AMONG the Mojave Indian tribes, there were never any arguments over inheritances, nor was there a leisure class living on the fruits of the toil of their forebears. That was because property was not allowed to accumulate. When a man died, his belongings were burned with him on his funeral pyre. The mourners added treasures of their own to the burning pile.

Human judgment is a two-edged weapon. If the lynch-gang, mad with a blood lust, had only asked the little girl an important question . . .

A ROPE ON THE MESA

by Paul W. Fairman

ONLY courage was left to the woman. Only that and the thought she used as a lash to drive herself forward across the desert: The child. The child must be brought to safety. She must keep moving for the sake of the child.

There had been a time of running, just after the escape, when she had carried the little girl. Then she had discarded her heavy skirts, the better to walk swiftly, a tiny hand in her own.

But the wound in her side had opened and now she was down in the desert dust, and her progress could be measured in slow, torturous inches—a painful hunching forward of legs, hands, fingernails, with blood clearly marking her course.

Flight from the terror had begun in darkness. Now the flaming sun was high, burning the mother and the child. The child whimpered at times, but softly. The tragedy had had a dulling effect upon her uncomprehending mind.

The horseman came swiftly, as from nowhere, and the woman raised her head and tried to form words with her

The woman tried to form words with her parched lips. There was quick thunder and the woman did not see the haze. She was dead. The man had put a bullet through her head

parched lips. She saw the man and the horse through a haze. Then there was quick thunder and the woman did not see even the haze. She was dead.

The man had put a bullet through her brain.

Captain Ranson, of the United States Cavalry, faced the townspeople of Bow, Arizona, with wrath in his eyes and loathing in his voice.

"I sent some men after the swine, but he got into the badlands east of Circle Rock and we had to give up. I'd have liked nothing better than to ferret him out, but I'm under orders and we have to move on. So I brought the woman's body in and now it's up to you."

Rafe Dixon, large, dark, sun-bitten, spoke for the crowd. "Yore shore it was a white man. Not an Injun?"

"Positive. We came up on the north side of Circle Rock and heard the shot, even above the pounding of our horse's hooves, when we were about four hundred yards away. When we came around the Rock, we found her lying there, shot through the head, and I caught a glimpse of the man through my telescope as he cut into the draw to the east. He was hunched down going hell for leather, with the child up front. Medium sized man with black mustaches and dark jowls. Definitely not an Indian."

And the mounted column swung away to the west after Crooked Nose, the Apache chief who had cut a crimson swath across southern Arizona.

In a surprisingly short time, five grim faced men rode out of Bow at a hard gallop. Rafe Dixon raised his arm, signalling for a halt. He spoke in a loud voice so that the four could hear:

"As I figger it, regardless o' where he's goin', he'll have to stop to make food for the young 'un and he'll need water. That points to the old adobe on Yaqui Mesa. That's the closest spring to Circle Rock. We may be too late but he's shore to stop there. All agreed?"

They were all agreed so, two hours later, the five horses trailed up the slope of the Yaqui and surrounded the small, lonesome looking adobe hut on its leveled-off top.

"Place looks deserted," Bill Talbott said. Talbott was a wiry little man who had Apache scalps sewed to his leather jacket.

"He prob'ly kilt Dad," Rafe Dixon answered. "Now watch it careful and we'll move in. Be ready to hit dirt if he's in there and starts shootin'."

Then, with almost the same breath he yelled, "Git yore hands away from thet holster or I'll blow yore head off!"

The order was directed toward a medium sized man with black mustache and heavy dark jowls who had stepped out of the adobe hut. He raised his hands automatically, as though bewildered, and the five avengers could see that he had been sleeping.

Rafe Dixon moved in swiftly as someone shouted. "There's the little gal behind him! Careful he don't use her for a shield!"

RAFE DIXON staved off that possibility by leaping from his horse and bringing a Colt gun barrel across the dark man's skull. The man dropped like a rock.

The little girl stared blankly. Sated with horrors, she could absorb no more. Rafe Dixon bent over the man while one of the five entered the adobe, came out and announced, "Dad ain't here. We'll find out whut he done with Dad when he comes to."

"We ain't wastin' no time," Rafe Dixon barked. "There's only one position I like to see skunks like this in. There's a tree and we got a rope."

"It ud be better if he was conscious," Bill Talbott said, regretfully. "Fust time in my life I ever felt like scalpin' a white man."

Another voice sniggered. "He ain't a white man. He's a polecat in a man's clothes."

"No more palaver," Rafe Dixon snorted. "We're a hangin' 'im now. All agreed?"

There were no dissenting voices, so they took the dark-jowled man and hung him from the limb of a gnarled desert tree and watched him twirl on the rope's end until he had strangled to death.

There was a magnetism in the macabre scene from which they could not tear their eyes, and they were standing thus when Dad Jordan rode up. Dad's face was flat, expressionless.

"He dead?"

Rafe Dixon turned, startled. He saw Dad. "Guess we saved you from gettin' a bullet through yore head. This rat was waitin' for you. Good thing we got here first."

"Tell me about it."

"A woman escaped from Crooked Nose and his Apaches and got as far as Circle Rock. He found her there and shot her through the skull and stole the little girl. A pretty cool character he was too. Did it right under the United States Cavalry's nose. Another sixty seconds they'd o' had 'im."

One of the five laughed. "Guess he knows now they ain't any place fer his kind in Arizony."

Dad Jordan regarded the hanging body.

"That ain't the way I heard it," he said.

"You knowed about it?" Rafe Dixon asked.

"I was here when he brought the little girl. I just come back from lookin' things over at the Rock."

They waited. Pop slid down from his horse and stood with thumbs hooked over his cartridge belt. He thought for a moment. Then he said:

"I got the story some diff'rent than that—and I think a mite more ac-c'rate."

"I suppose he claimed he didn't do it," Rafe Dixon sneered.

"Oh he done it all right. Told me 'bout it. Just like you said. He rid up, shot the woman, scooped up the little girl and got away from there."

THEY stared in amazement while Dad Jordan pushed his hat back off a wrinkled brow.

"They was only one slight diff'rence. You see them cavalrymen that came round the rock. He only heerd 'em. He didn't never see 'em. And the woman told 'im they was the Injuns she'd escaped from."

The body moved in the wind as Dad went on.

"Havin' sense he knew he could save but one. And knowin' what the Apaches would do to the woman if they got her again, he put a bullet in her brain. Would any o' you men rid off and left her if you'd been him?"

Desperately they sought justification. "He just *said* the woman told him it was Apaches 'round the rock. He was pro'bly lyin'."

Dad shook his head. "The tot there's 'most six. She knows what her mommy said. All I had to do was ask her."

The old man's voice had hardened. His long fingers twitched.

"You could o' done the same if you hadn't been in such an all-fired hurry to see a man hangin' from a rope."

The silence was alive now—a leering thing, mixing with the wind to make ghoulish laughter.

"Guess—guess the pore devil deserves a Christian burial," Bill Tal-

bott muttered. His lips grinned, aimlessly for, lack of a better occupation.

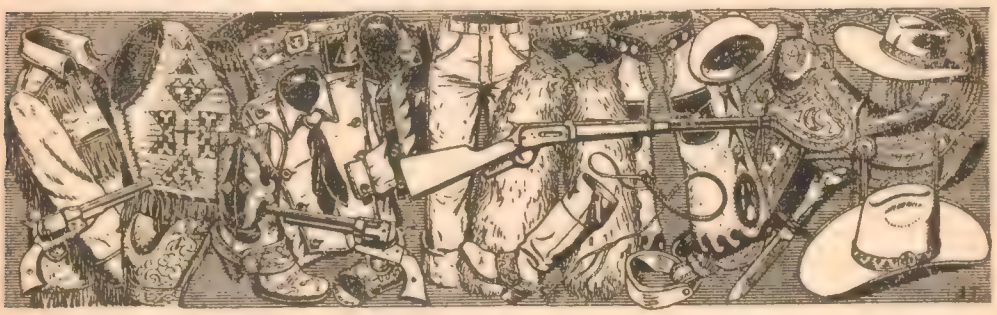
"Wal that's right big o' you, son," Dad retorted. "Right big. But I say—git! Git in tarnation off my land, whilst my hands'll still obey orders! I'll take care o' the buryin'."

They went away as they had come. And, as they rode back to town, one indignant thought was in their minds:

Why hadn't Dad Jordan cut the man down? Why had he left the body hanging there for them to see when they looked back as they dropped over the lip of the Mesa?

Swinging slowly there—swinging in the desert wind.

THE END



WHAT THE WELL-DRESSED COWBOY WORE

By

★ ALICE RICHARDS ★

ABOUT all that is known about the Western cowboy by about eighty per cent of the people today who do not live in the West, is learned from that great enterprise, the Hollywood motion picture. However, this is not the most authentic place in which to receive one's information, especially on the West. The movies have taught us to think of the cowboy costume as particularly gaudy and flamboyant. Perhaps they are right, if they speak of the cowboy of many years back, for at that time the cowboy did look like this, but this definitely is not the whole picture by any means. This picture was true enough when he got dressed up for a spree in the town Saturday nights, but on the range, when he was at work, the cowboy abhorred the fancy dress at all times. Everything about him then, from his ten-gallon hat to the high-heeled boots of his, served a purpose and reeked of simplicity. In fact, he was more often than not quite sloppy about his dress, and didn't care much how he got to look while on duty.

His shirt was of cotton or soft wool and was without a collar. Over this he wore an unbuttoned vest, whose pockets were a storehouse for tobacco and cigarette papers and anything else that was of importance. It was a veritable filing cabinet, without a filing system.

But what may be of some surprise, he rejected blue denims, which is what almost everyone believes is worn by the cowboys. The cowboy rejected them because they were being worn by so many of the farmers so much of the time and he felt himself above that class. Many a cowboy, especially on the West Coast, wore the ordinary woolen trousers that were worn by the working man. Over them, when riding and working with horses, the cowboy wore the "chaps" that are so often attached to him. The word "chaps," by the way, comes from the Mexican word "Chaparejos." They were made originally from two hides hanging down on either side from the pommel of the saddle to protect the cowboy's knees from getting scratched in the chapparal. They resembled, somewhat roughly, two trouser legs fastened around the waist with a belt which buckled in the back. And the cowboys were not hampered in taste, either. There were all kinds of chaps for all kinds of different occasions. Plain leather, stamped leather, and leather either wholly of fur or with fringes of fur on the outside seams adorned the legs of the cowboy of yesterday.

But this business about the chaps was mere child play compared to the cowboy's boots, of which he was particularly proud. Always wishing the best and only the best, he took perhaps three

or four months in which to save up enough money for a pair of boots. And when at last the great day rolled around when there was sufficient funds beneath his bunkhouse mattress for the boots, he would commence to draw an outline of both his feet on a piece of paper and send it away to his favorite bootmaker in a large town nearby.

After weeks of feverish waiting, or maybe a few months later, the boots would finally arrive, and they were of the finest leather, hand-sewn to a nice fit, and often handsomely decorated. They were very narrow and close-fitting in the foot, so that the foot could slip easily into the stirrup of the cowboy's horse, and high in the heel so that the foot wouldn't slip when in was in the stirrup and go through. High heels on the boots were particularly designed to brace the wearer when he was roping on foot in a corral. Tight-fitting and high-heeled boots they were, of the finest black leather. They marked the cowboy very well, and he chose them with loving care, the same care expended on his hat and his saddle. Fancy stitching always adorned the boots, and it was not infrequently done up in red stitching, decorating the sides, with an inlay of different-colored leather showing in front, beneath the top. And the men of today have the nerve to talk about women's shoes being so gaudily decorated!

With the beautiful boots went large, ornate, cruel-looking spurs. This was to check the horse in any attempts he might make which were not to his master's liking. But usually about the first thing that any cowboy did with his new spurs was to file the sharp edges off the rowels, for no cowboy enjoys cutting a horse's side up, no matter what the animal may have been doing.

When the cold weather was upon him, the cowboy wore buckskin gloves and, also, he wore them for roping, as he was more than apt to cut his hands with the rope's edges. And these gloves were sometimes used as a caste mark, as they indicated that those who wore them were such good riders and such wonderful ropers they were spared from such menial tasks as the chopping of wood and the fetching of water for the ranch houses. Just like the boots, of good and rich leather, the gloves had long, wide gauntlets which were often embroidered with an eagle, or if he was from Texas, the Texas stor adorned this place of honor. Also on top of this, decorated leather cuffs were almost always in sight and were worn over the shirt sleeves to protect the wrists of the cowboy.

One of the most important and sometimes inconspicuous part of the cowboy's dress was the kerchief he wore about his neck. It was more than likely of red color, because red and white were the only two colors the storekeeper in the town carried, and white got dirty much too quickly, besides which it made the neck too conspicuous for good shooting. When out on the range, the white was an easy target for some Indian or horse thief or vagrant animal to spot, and this was not the best thing to have around the neck. When a dust storm blew up, as it was often apt to do, the kerchief served as a protective mask when pulled up over the nose.

One cannot comment on the dress of the cowboy without adding a paragraph about his hat. The ten-gallon hat was as important to a cowboy as were his boots, and it was often more expensive. Costing from fifteen dollars all the way up to fifty, these sombreros were often of fine felt, gray, black or light brown in color, with a belt for a hatband. A thong always hung down on each side of the hat for tying it on in the windy weather that often blew in off the plains. But the style often varied between the south and the northern part of the West. In the south, it was worn a bit dented at the sides near the top, so that it rose to a peak seven or eight inches high, but in the north, it was worn with a circular crease around the crown, so that it was flat on top and only a few inches high. This pattern was followed so very closely that if a northerner was seen wearing his hat at its full height, he was immediately accused of affectation.

Besides providing all the shade that a small cottonwood would give, this ten-gallon hat served yet another purpose. When it was waved, it very easily could turn a skittish pony. When it was thrown at an oncoming angry cow, who was attempting to rescue her calf as it was being branded, it would deflect her from her course, stop her and by the time she had remembered her original purpose, the calf would be finished with the branding. A green horse, which was so new to the feel of the pulling reins to his body, could easily be turned with a wave of the hat before his eyes. The cowboy was never seen without his combined tool and headpiece from the time he first left his bunk in the morning until he returned to it for sleep in the evening.

But his saddle—his saddle was as much or more a part of him than his clothes. Proud of his saddle was the cowboy, and upon it the most elaborate decorations were lavished. Nothing was too good for his saddle. But the size of the "skirt" was not merely to provide space for the stamped patterns that adorned it, it also gave an unusually firm grip on the horse's back. His saddle was the last thing a cowboy would ever part with. He might be able to escape from a very hot poker game minus his horse, guns, chaps and shirt, but if he still had his saddle he could walk toward home that evening with a smile on his lips. The man who had to sell something to keep himself alive, sold everything else he had before he even thought about selling his saddle, and then he looked around for something else to sell. When it was said of someone that "he had sold his saddle" it meant that the cowboy was really down and out.

There is no doubt about it. The cowboy of yesteryear was a colorful figure, not only in legend, but in clothes, too. From coast to coast, he will always be known as such.

He knew a touch of fear, a delicious, tingling sensation—then

The GUN

by William P. McGivern

WHEN Jud Wilson was nine years old his father gave him a rusty Colt .45. He told him to get it cleaned and oiled and then they'd see about some ammunition.

Jud was a thin youngster, with straight black hair that had never been cut, an intent, almost solemn face, and dark, curiously old eyes.

That night he slept with the gun beside him in his bunk. The next morning he arose at six and went out to the barn where his father's foreman

his gun cleared the holster before the puncher's moved an inch

If you learn to use a six-gun better than most men, you become too dangerous, Jud Wilson found out. But, even if you substitute another *tool*, you never forget the gun—it haunts you!

gave him some rough cloth and a can of oil. After looking at Jud's earnest face and then the gun, he smiled good-humoredly.

"What you expect to hunt with that thing?" he said.

Jud felt uneasy. "Don't know. Pap give it to me, said for me to get it cleaned up and he'd give me some bullets. Will it shoot, Bill?"

Bill took the gun and peered at it closely. "I expect it will," he said, after a moment or so. The gun was an ugly, battered thing, a single action pistol

with a long barrel, a filed-off trigger guard and filed-down sight. Someone had made this gun to be used in a hurry. The sight had been filed down to prevent catching in a holster; the trigger guard had been removed to eliminate any fumbling, and fraction of a second's delay. "Looks like a real gunman owned it," he said. "Maybe some big marshal or a real badman." He ruffled Jud's straight black hair and went out to round up his men.

Jud spent that day and the rest of the week working on the gun. The rust came away grudgingly, but finally the blued metal was clean and shining. He oiled it carefully, tenderly, covering it with a light glistening film. Then he took it to his father.

His father was sitting on the front porch of the house, which commanded a view of the southern section of his pasturage. The ranch house had been built on high ground, overlooking a wide, well-watered valley. Now it was evening and a purple mist was drifting down from the hills and the air was clean and soft.

Jud held out the gun for his inspection.

"Well, well," his father said approvingly. "You done a lot of work, I kin see." He sighted the barrel and checked the action of the trigger and hammer. Finally he settled back in his chair with the gun held carelessly in his lap.

"You'll get your ammunition, Jud. But I don't want you shooting up anything around here. Go down to some gulch and blast away. Get used to the feel of it and the kick. Won't hurt you none. Your Ma never liked guns, but she was from the East. Never did understand they were just as important out here as knives and forks was back where she came from. More important. I guess nobody ever saved his life with a knife and fork. But she was half right. Shouldn't be no call for a man to carry a shooting iron. Should be able to live without a gun at your side. But that's the way it is and you got to live in the world, remember that, son."

Jud heard his father's words but his eyes were fixed on the gun. Having it out of his possession for even a moment gave him a peculiar feeling of helplessness and loss. He didn't know why this was; he just wanted his gun back.

"Another thing," his father went on. "You're a big boy now, mighty near a man. You got yourself a gun but I want to tell you two things about it. Never draw unless you have to; and never draw it unless you mean to shoot. Understand that? Be mighty sure you got to go for it before you do. And then don't try and scare nobody with it, or try to bluff. When you reach for that gun know that you're gonna shoot. That'll make you careful about going for it in the first place."

THE next morning Jud rode down to a gulch in the hills. He had two pocketsfull of bullets and the gun was stuck into his belt. After he tethered his pony he made a target of bark and set it up at one end of the gulch. Walking fifty paces from it he stopped and pushed a shell into the chamber of his gun. He felt his heart pounding then with a new rhythm. There was no fear in him, but a feeling of sudden strength and power.

He raised the gun, sighted along the gleaming barrel; his finger tightened slowly on the trigger. He tried to get the piece of bark in line with the barrel, but it seemed an impossibly long way off; his hand and arm began to tremble with the strain.

Suddenly the gun went off, shattering the silence. His arm jerked into the air as if someone had struck it from below. His hand and wrist ached from

the recoil; but he hadn't closed his eyes.

He hurried to the facing of rock where he had set up his bark target. He had missed. Looking for the spot the bullet struck the rock he found it high above his head, a full twenty feet above the target. He whistled slowly and there was a thoughtful frown on his face as he reloaded the gun. . . .

The ammunition went quickly, too quickly, and he never hit within fifteen feet of the bark target. But riding home a few hours later he felt at peace. You could learn to shoot, like you learned anything else. And there wasn't anything else as important as shooting.

For the next month he stayed in his gulch, firing at his target. He had reshaped it now into the figure of a man. Why, he didn't know, only it seemed right to him. His father humored him and the hands joked with him about his shooting, but he never smiled, but looked away, fixing his curiously old eyes on the horizon.

Everyone felt that it was a passing obsession. That, when he got a new pony or got interested in a lariat, he'd forget about his gun. But it didn't work that way.

He spent that summer shooting and the sound of the firing became as much a part of the range as the creaking of saddle leather and the laughing of the men.

He was hitting the target now. Not often, but he had learned to compensate for the gun's recoil and his aim was improving. He learned that it took too much time to sight along the barrel; that he had to look at the target and not the gun. When he learned that much he realized that it didn't matter where he held the gun, as long as there was that connection between his eyes and the target and the muscles of his

arm. He held the gun at his waist then and tried to hit the target. And later, many months later, he held the gun at his hip, where it would be if it had been drawn from a holster.

When he was eleven years old he was a better shot than any of his father's hands. He was strangely secretive about his talent, for some reason that wasn't clear even to him. He wouldn't allow anyone to watch him shoot, and he never talked about it.

There had been other guns by this time. A better single-action Colt and then a six-shooter. He got a holster with the six-shooter and began to practice drawing. With the same strange force that had made him shoot, he practiced now to shoot in a hurry. He discovered that drawing and firing were part of one smooth motion. The hand flashed downward and came up in a circular movement that found its natural culmination in the recoil of the gun.

Something had happened to him by this time that he couldn't understand. There was no thrill or fun in shooting any more. There was something grim about his constant, relentless practice. He had grown, still thin and hard as a lathe, and his face was still somber, curiously old.

There was nothing much in his life but his shooting. He had no way of knowing how good he was, no standard of comparisons. At twelve there were probably a half dozen men in Nevada who were better shots; but it was doubtful if there was anyone as fast.

His whole body seemed built for the

express purpose of drawing and firing a gun with bewildering speed. His arm was long, flexible and his hand was big and steady; the eyes above them were hard and cold. And he was still a child . . .

HIS father called him as he was leaving the house. Jud went into the room where he was sitting by the window.

"Goin' into town?" his father asked.

"Yes."

Jud was eighteen now, tall, slim, with a careless animal grace in his every movement. His face was burned dark and there was little expression in his eyes or features.

"Hands been paid after the spring round-up," his father said. "They'll all be in town tonight."

He looked at Jud and waited a moment; but there was no answer. There was little connection now between them. They had become strangers over the years.

Jud waited patiently, standing motionless in the warm, darkened room. At his side there was a black six-shooter, hung low against his thigh. He had never given up his shooting; for ten years it had taken the place in his life of mother, friends, girl—everything.

"Don't get in no trouble," his father said. He shifted uneasily in his chair. "Jud, I don't like the way you look when you're wearing a gun. I've seen men who look like you do, and most of them was killers. Take care of yourself, boy."

"I aim to," Jud said and went out the door.

The town's one bar was crowded when Jud arrived. He didn't like the noise and the smoke and the coarse, brainless laughter of the men—hardened punchers letting off steam after a winter of work. Still, he made his way to the bar and had a drink.

. . . A man staggered, bumped into him and his drink spilled on the bar. He turned, feeling a rising tide of excitement in him. Behind him stood a man of perhaps forty, a drunken, bleary-eyed puncher.

"You take a lot of room, 'bub," the man said.

His tone was casual, the words blurring carelessly together. Several men at the bar glanced at Jud, then went back to their drinks.

Jud knew that if he smiled and turned back to the bar the matter would end. There was no call to get riled up. But he didn't turn back to the bar. The excitement in him was suddenly intense and sweet.

"Get away from me," he said, and his voice was low, deliberately insulting. He faced the man squarely, his shoulders tense. "Get out of here or make your play!"

This was a time when personal quarrels were settled quickly, violently. Men heard Jud's words and caught the implications in the tone. They put their drinks down quickly and faded to one side.

The drunken puncher stared in bewilderment at Jud. Then he began to laugh. "I'll make my play, bub," he said. "But I ought to just give you a durn good spanking."

There was no way out for him. Jud's order couldn't be ignored. He went for his gun, clumsily.

Jud's hand shot down at the same second. He knew a touch of fear, a delicious, tingling sensation; and then he knew he had the man beat. His gun cleared the holster before the puncher's had moved an inch.

He saw the sudden drink-blurred fear in the man's eyes; saw the helplessness and surprise in his face. Then his gun swung up and he fired . . .

Watching the puncher lying on the floor he heard a tense whisper:

"That's old man Wilson's boy, ain't it? Fast as a snake."

LATER he stood in the middle of the big front room of his home, facing his father.

"You murdered him," his father said.

Jud didn't answer. He was staring at the floor, his face dark.

"I saw it in you," his father said, bitterly. "I seen you look at your gun and I had a fear you was a killer. Now I guess it's started."

Jud was torn now between something that was warring inside him. He had never known the exultation, the thrill of facing a man, beating him to the draw. He wanted that feeling again and again. He wanted to push through the doors of a bar, and listen for the silence that would follow. He wanted men to back away from him, to fear him and his guns.

But he wanted something else, too. He didn't know what it was, but he could feel it inside him, warring with the lust for killing.

"You're bad," his father said, heavily. "I want you out of here by morning. Understand?"

"I'll go now."

"Then go."

Jud's face was twisted with strain and the elements inside him were raging. For a moment he stood there, sweating, and then he began to relax slowly. He knew how it was going to be.

Slowly, he unbuckled his belt, let it and the gun drop to the floor. It hit the floor with a thud.

"You gave it to me," he said. "Take it back. I'll never touch a gun as long as I live." He didn't know, then, what would take its place.

He turned and went out the door.

THE horseman stopped in front of the low, pleasant farm house and smiled at the child who was playing at the door. "Hello, bub. Your daddy home?"

Jud heard the man's voice and came around the side of the house. He smiled when he recognized the rider.

"Hello, Jake. Climb down and rest a bit."

The rider was tall, rawboned, with steady blue eyes and thinning sandy hair.

"Thanks, Jud."

They went inside the house and a tall girl with golden hair came from the kitchen, wiping her hands on an apron. "Why, hello, Jake," she said. "Hardly expected company this early."

"I ain't company," Jake grinned.

"Well, sit down. I'll make you men some coffee."

Jud grinned at her as she went to the kitchen. This was what he had found to replace the gun at his side. He was twenty-four now, still slim and hard, but his face was cheerful and his eyes didn't look old any more.

When he was sitting with Jake he said, "Well, what's up?"

"Trouble," Jake said. "There was a meeting of the ranchers last night about us nesters. Seems like most of the ranchers want to get along with us. But Slade says he'll run us off our farms."

"He can't do much by himself."

"Don't fool yourself. He can make it hard on us. We can't stay up all night guarding our fences and crops. He'll

stampede his herds through our fields and a year's work will be ground back into the dirt."

"We'll plant again," Jud said stubbornly.

"That ain't all. He's hired a couple of gun hands. They ain't punchers, I can tell you. I bet they never done a day's work in their lives, but they wear two guns each and they look mean. Slade figures to run us out or kill us off, I guess.

"The other nesters sitting tight?"

"So far. But it's going to make a difference when the shootin' starts."

Jud's wife came in with the coffee then and put it on the table.

"What's all this solemn talk?" she said.

"Slade wants to run us out," Jud said. He looked at Jake. "What you got on your mind?"

"We got to fight back. The boys noticed you never wore a gun, Jud. They're wondering about everybody right now, how they're goin' to stick. They're wondering about you, Jud."

"I'll stick without guns," Jud said.

"That won't do us any good," Jake said. "We got to show 'em we mean to fight. I want every nester along the ridge to strap on a gun and get ready to use it if he has to."

Jud's wife put her hand on his arm. "You never carried a gun, did you, Jud?"

"I'm not meaning to, either," he said harshly. He looked at Jake. "That's my answer, if you're asking me."

Jake was silent for a moment; then his expression changed. The friendliness was gone.

"Okay, Jud." He nodded at Jud's wife and left.

They sat at the table for several minutes in silence after he'd gone.

Finally she said: "I want you to do what you think best, Jud. But sometimes fightin' is more important than just livin'."

"You want me to strap on a gun and get into this?"

"That's up to you, Jud."

"I'll get on without a gun," he said, and walked out of the room. . . .

One of them handed him a single-action Colt and a belt of bullets

THAT night Jake was shot and killed in his home by Slade's two hired gunmen. While his wife and two children watched, the gunmen forced a fight with him, then when he went for his gun they shot him dead.

Jud got this information from a group of nesters who stopped at his home that night. Jud met them outside his porch steps.

Their leader said: "The time is come to take sides, Jud. We figger you're with us or you ain't."

Jud sighed in the still air. Beyond the massed riders he could see by moonlight the waving grain on his land; behind him he felt the presence of his wife and upstairs he knew their son was sleeping.

These were the things that had come into his life to take the place of the gun and the feeling it gave him; but during these last six years he had known that the need to fight was not gone from him, but only buried. He had fought it stubbornly, knowing it would destroy him, but now he was tired of fighting. He could feel an eagerness churning through him now; a grim relief that the long period of waiting was over. Now the dam had broken and he gave way to the sensation that came to him, the animal-like thrill of lust.

"I'd be obliged if I could borrow a gun," he said.

There was an approving murmur from the horsemen; and behind him he heard his wife draw a short, sharp breath. He wanted to turn to her, to reassure her, but other feelings were dominating him now.

One of the men handed him a single action Colt and a belt of bullets.

"It's an old 'un," the man apologized.

It was the kind of gun Jud had learned to shoot with, and the smooth butt against his hard palm felt natural.

"I'll get along with it," he said.

He strapped the gun about his thin hips and with it came the feeling of excitement and power. Automatically his hand dropped in a draw. He wasn't as fast as he'd once been, but the smooth speed of the movement caused a murmur of astonishment from the riders.

"I'll saddle," he said.

. . . Riding down the main street of Red Gap Jud rode knee-to-knee with the leader.

"They're in the Silver Palace," the leader said. "They been drinkin' since they shot up Jake." He glanced uneasily at Jud. "Got any ideas about how we should handle this?"

"Yeah," Jud said. "I'll go in and call him out. You boys wait. When the shootin' starts come on in."

"That's leaving a lot to you."

"Okay."

There was something about his quietness and assurance that silenced further conversation.

JUD dismounted and kicked open the swinging doors of the Silver Palace. This is what he had wanted and now he had it. The doors flew inward and there was a sudden hush as he stepped inside. Men turned from the bar and what they saw in his face caused them to fade quickly out of range. A tinkling piano broke off in the middle of a bar as the pianist took one look and ducked behind his instrument.

Standing at the middle of the bar were two hardened men, dressed in black, with crossed gun belts slung at their waist. They put their glasses down and turned to face Jud.

"What do you want, nester?" one of them said.

Jud felt the power and excitement running sweetly through him. This sensation he had denied himself. Now it was back and he knew it was too strong to fight any longer. The wife and son and the waving grain on his own land could never compensate for the loss of this savage thrill.

"I came to settle a little argument," he said, his voice low and hard. "My friends think you jaspers are tough. I

told 'em I didn't think so. Let's settle it."

One of the men laughed; then went streaking for his gun.

Jud made his play at the same instant. He hadn't drawn or fired a gun for six years; but the skill and speed were still at his command. Not so fast as when he dropped his gun in his father's home and swore never to touch it again; then he was probably the fastest man in the West.

Now there were probably a few men who could beat him to the draw and shoot straighter. But neither of them happened to be shooting it out with him right then.

He killed the first man before either of them had their guns clear of their holsters. Dropping in a crouch he swung his gun to the second man, who had his gun out by this time. Jud's gun fired first, but the shots were so close they blended together.

Jud saw the man stagger, saw his gun hand drop, but at the same time he felt a searing pain shoot along his right arm. The gun fell from his fingers, as he staggered back . . .

Later that night the doctor worked on him while his wife sat on the bed holding his good hand. A group of nesters stood in the room.

"I think Slade is fixed," one of them then said. "The other ranchers will make it tough for him now if he causes trouble."

Another said: "They didn't like his bringing in gunmen in the first place."

Someone laughed: "They ain't goin' to be no trouble to haul out now."

The doctor began bandaging Jud's arm and there was a frown on his face. "Bullet caught your elbow," he said. "Don't imagine you'll ever do any more shooting, young fellow."

Jud smiled at him. The tension was gone from him and he felt at peace again. He looked at his wife and she smiled back at him.

"Kin I plow all right, Doc?" he asked.

"Yeah, you can plow all right."

"That's enough for me then, I guess."

His wife tightened her grip on his left hand.

CACHED CALVES

★ **By WILLIAM CLAY** ★

COWS HAVE "MOTHER-LOVE" TOO!

THE trained eye of the cowpuncher as he rides the range in the springtime sometimes notices an object which a less experienced observer would not see at all. It is a tiny baby calf, cached by the mother while she goes for water, or to graze at a little distance away. She has pushed the calf down and told it, or some injunction of instinct has told it, to lie perfectly still, in order to escape detection by wolves, coyotes, and other enemies. And so it lies in a patch of grass a little longer than most, or among the sagebrush, or even on bare ground, sprawled, shapeless and as close to the ground as possible, and utterly motionless. Elk, deer and antelope also cache their young when the mother has to be away for awhile. Range cattle are almost as wild as they.

If a cowboy spots one of these motionless bits of life cached near a bunch of cattle, then he had better leave it alone, and not get off his horse to look at it. Should he do this, he is apt to be charged furiously by the cattle. A man on foot is always in danger of his life among the wild range cattle. They consider him an enemy. Mounted, they understand him, and he can control them, and is safe from them.

However, should the cowpuncher find a calf, when the cattle are not near, he will dismount and pull the calf to its feet. If he is fairly sure that it belongs to his outfit, he will earmark it. If he plays with and talks to the calf a little, then he will find that it wants to follow him when he rides off. It thus quickly unlearns the lesson of caution its mother has tried to teach it. The cowpuncher will then push the calf to earth again, or several times if necessary, until it stays quiet. It waits there, protected from most dangers by its lack of motion, until its mother returns to the place where she has cached it.

* * *

'SKINNY COW' IN BLISTER CREEK

by Lester Barclay

CIRCUS!" Little Johnny Quin yelled. "Who cares about the circus? The Yaleys are comin' to town."

"YAH! YAH! YAH!" the three smallest of the group of boys gathered on the refuse-strewn lot, chanted in unison. The fifth, the largest, demanded quiet, then turned to Johnny and said, "Look! If you don't wanna get in say so. Besides, them Yaleys ain't gonna come in. You heard what the Sheriff said. . . ."

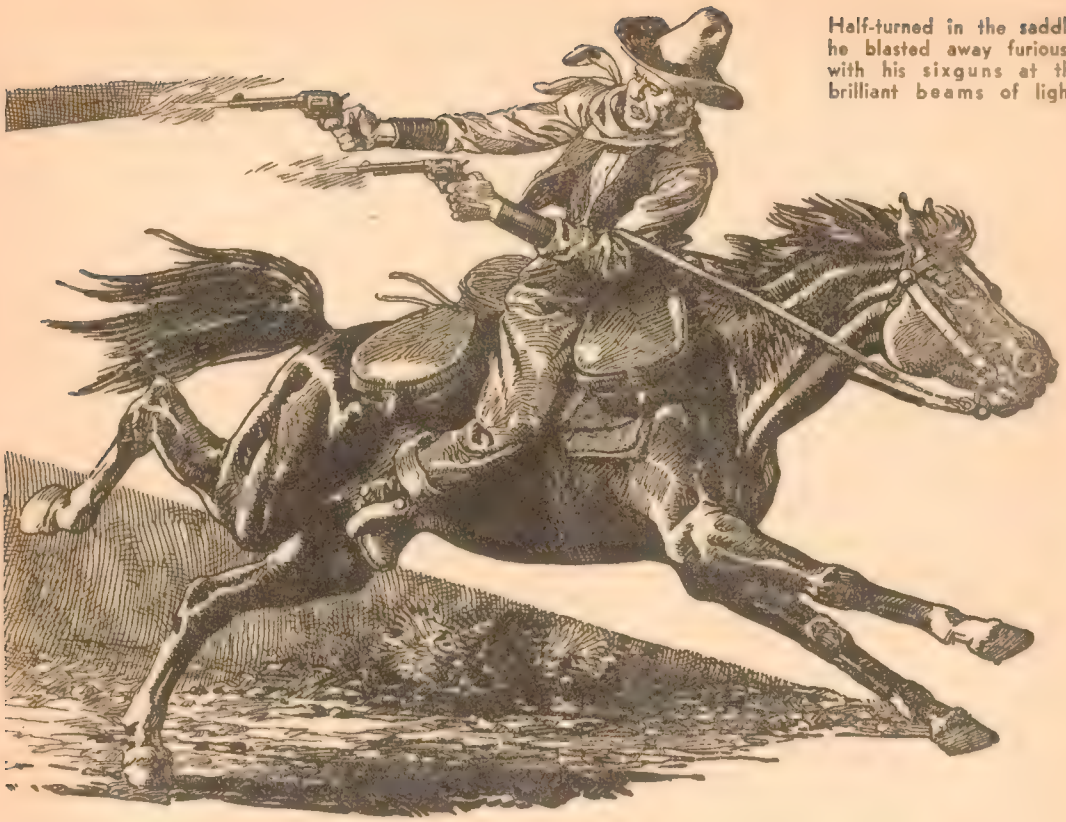
Johnny stood his ground:

"Don't care what the sheriff said. My Paw says if Gert Yaley says he's acomin', he's acomin'."

"Aah! Come on, gang," said the other. "No use talkin' to him . . ."

* * *

Jeb Perkins, the "twenty-four hour" man for the Golem Circus and Wild



Half-turned in the saddle, he blasted away furiously with his sixguns at the brilliant beams of light!

Johnny's dad was a drunkard, and they all knew it—except Johnny. And when the crooks tried to hijack the Circus payroll, they ran into trouble, and they ran into Johnny's dad—Johnny's brave old man!

West Show, flipped his Panama further up on his bald spot, bit deeper into the bitterness of the butt, which was all that remained of the black cigar, and turned scowling eyes on Sheriff Morley.

"Eighteen years we been comin' to Blister Creek, an' now you're tellin' me we oughtn't play here today. What's the matter. . . . ?"

Morley blew his breath in a sigh. It *was* going to be a job explaining to Perkins his reasons because Morley had nothing concrete on which to base them. "Queer feelings," "instinct," were not words to be used on practical people like Jeb Perkins. They wanted facts. And Morley couldn't give them.

"We-ll," Morley began, "well, just like you say. F'r the past eighteen years you've been comin' to town. It's a big thing, too. Don't think I don't know that. Heck! People come from a hundred miles around . . . You'd think they had enough of horses and punch-

ers . . . Can't never figure them. But that's what makes the circus business, I suppose . . ."

If Morley knew Perkins, the reverse was also true. Being the advance man for a circus meant meeting every law officer and politician in the country. Perkins liked to come to Blister Creek. It wasn't a large town; he often wondered why the show played it. But Art Golem never failed to include it in his itinerary. And the show always played to capacity houses. Always, too, Morley gave wonderful cooperation. Now . . . Perkins was worried.

"Okay, Nate, spill it," Perkins said softly. "There's somethin' eatin' you. Man! You can talk to me. . . ."

"Yeah," Morley grinned. He swiveled away from Perkins and showed him his broad back. Harlan's Livery faced the back wall of the jail, and Jack Harlan was at the bellows of his forge. A roan gelding was standing in one of the stalls. A woman walked by, one arm busy with a small child and the other holding a sack of groceries from Jensen's Food Shop. It was a peaceful scene the sheriff was seeing. . . . He turned back to Perkins and his eyes were hard, uncompromising. "I can talk to you all right, but I may not make sense. There's a gang of men operating in the hills, a gang called the Yaleys. Rustlers, thieves and, lately, bank robbers.

"I HAD a run-in with them some six weeks ago; they tried to rob the Cattleman's Trust Bank here in town. Y'see, the Cattleman's holds the County funds and since Blister Creek's a shipping point a lot of money's laying in the vaults. Guess the Yaleys thought they could make a good haul. Thing was I got wind of it in time and there was a lot of shootin' an' when it was all over there was one dead Yaley, Tom, the youngest, a couple of wounded deputies, and a shot-up town.

"Gert Yaley, he's the oldest and meanest of the four brothers, said he'd come back an' when he did there was going to be a dead Sheriff and maybe more. . . . Well, Jeb, there won't be a better time than tonight. For one thing, with the circus in, there'll be a lot of strangers and hellin' goin' on. For another there'll be the added inducement of all that money from the receipts. I don't like it. . . ."

Jeb Perkins whistled soundlessly. But already his quick mind, the mind of a man who had to do his thinking on his feet and under the most trying circumstances, was looking around corners, searching for a solution:

"Shucks! You can deputize a hundred men. Station them at every exit, every street corner, in every store. . . ."

"I thought of that," Morley said. "The point is, with the town full of women and children, I can't take a chance on a general gunfight. Frankly, I don't know what to do."

For once Jeb hadn't a suggestion either. He was on the same train as Morley. After a few seconds' deliberation, Jeb said:

"Look, Nate. Old man Golem is comin' in this afternoon. He's one heck of a shrewd cookie. And a Westerner himself. Maybe he'll have an idea."

Morley took the other by one arm and brought him out to the narrow shelf of concrete porch in front of the jail.

"Look at that," he said, pointing with one arm to the street in front. "Every cheap-jack gambler and his brother for miles around, have come to town. The pickin's will be easy, they figure. Why, it takes thirty men alone to watch all the games. Every third store is a

saloon. Now watch this. . . ."

He had pointed to a group of mounted men coming from the direction of the graveled road leading into the hills. There must have been twenty in the group and they rode wildly into town, shouting and shooting their pistols as wildly. They rode up before the largest, most pretentious saloon, dismounted, and walked in still shouting at the tops of their voices.

"See what I mean?" Morley went on. "Why Gert Yaley could send half the population of Pima Springs into this town and we'd never know it. That's why I'm scared about this afternoon and tonight. . . ."

"Pima Springs!" Jeb asked. "What sort of place is that?"

"A hell-hole," Morley said softly, bitterly. "An' I can't do nothing about it. It's just across the county line an' out of my jurisdiction. It's a town run hog-wild by and for the lowest trash in the west. They got a Sheriff there who takes his cut out of every gambling spot and out of every saloon in town. Gert Yaley controls the town; he has the largest saloon and gambling spot. Jeb, I'd give a million dollars to know what Yaley's planning on doing. . . ."

* * *

". . . I'll bet Morley'd give a pile of dough just to know what I've got on my mind," Gert Yaley said to his two brothers and the four others standing by the bare blackjack table.

There was a gusty roar of laughter at the words.

The three Yaleys looked very much alike, tall, gaunt, bearded, wearing stained clothes which looked very much as though the three had fallen into the same mud hole. The other four, gathered around the table, looked as though they fit very well in the same frame. Each was armed with a pair of guns swinging low in holsters tied down to their levies.

Gert went on:

"Good thing Tom Quin rode in the other day to tell us about the circus. It's bound to be a snap. Ramon . . ."

"Si, Senor," a wiry Mexican, whose face was distorted by a knife scar which ran the length of it from forehead to chin, said.

"You better go now with your boys. You got the longest road. . . ."

The Mexican grinned crookedly, waved a hand at the rest and swung off on his hand-tooled Mexican boots.

Gert nodded soberly. A wild look sent spots of red shooting through his greenish-colored eyes. He looked a little mad. The others watched him warily. Ever since Tom had been killed, Gert acted like a devil and none knew when he would suddenly break into a sudden fit of deadly anger. Gert turned to the smallest of the brothers, Bud.

"Guess everybody's in Blister Creek by now. Shucks, nobody'll be able to tell who's who 'cept us. From buckboards to Perly Gates' new Buick we got every rig out there. Town'll look plumb empty when we leave."

Once more there was deep-throated laughter.

"In more ways than one," said a giant of a man. His name was Hanson, and he acted as a bouncer in Gert's place, called Rustler's Roost. Hanson was also Gert's chief trigger man. He was a cold-blooded beast who had a penchant for beating the weak, and shooting the strong . . . in the back. "That bank'll be cleaner than a calf after the buzzards get through with it."

GERT grinned grimly. "That, Hanson, is why I sent Ramon off. We ain't gonna break the bank. Morley ain't a fool. He knows I'll be back, I

said so. An' he's goin' to watch the bank like a hawk. The circus'll be my play. There's more ready cash and easier to get cash in the cashier's cage than in the whole bank.

"Now that we're alone, here's the set-up. Quin is spotting the bank for us. Everybody'll jam up there late this afternoon. The night show starts a little after eight. Exactly eight thirty, the deal starts. We wait till the shooting begins, then move in on the circus. There'll be twenty of the boys in the tent ready to go to work. It'll be a snap. . . ."

"Yeah," Hanson said admiringly. "I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for the whole town when we got through with it."

"Gert," Bud suddenly broke in. His brow was furrowed in thought. "I want the Sheriff. . . ."

"No!" the word snapped out like a pistol shot. "The Sheriff's mine. Understand? The Sheriff's mine!" Gert Yaley said. The madness in his eyes were a blazing fury now. . . .

THE man who stepped out of the Last Drink Saloon was on the lank side. He had a lean, narrow face with a wide, fine brow. His eyes, usually a deep shade of blue, were now red-rimmed, bloodshot and a little out of focus. His name was Tom Quin and he was three quarters on the way to being drunk.

There was a mashed half of a tailor-made cigarette stuck to his lower lip and as he took the last step down he fumbled with slightly quivering fingers for the unlit smoke stuck to his lip. They missed and a surprised look came to his eyes. Suddenly he teetered off balance on the step and before he could recover slipped and fell. Luckily it was a single step. A small cloud of dust rose and after a second settled over the figure. Passers-by laughed and passed remarks about the man. But he was oblivious to all that. His fingers still fumbled for the butt on his lip.

He gathered himself together and arose with a slight effort. Then settling his shoulders he started down the dusty street toward his home. He passed the jail and saw the Sheriff and a stranger standing on the steps. He nodded solemnly toward them and continued without pausing. The five blocks of paved street that was the main thoroughfare of Blister Creek ended in a curving road which had once known a top surface of gravel. It had worn thin through most of it and the bare, brown earth showed. The man continued his walk straight down the middle of the road. Homes had been fairly close at the beginning. Now they were separated by acres of brush and sand and growths of cactus in a completely random manner.

At last he arrived at his destination. The years had played havoc with the frame of the house he was approaching. It had a warped look about it and more strange, it seemed bent and twisted much like its owner when he was drunk. The shingles of the roof had spread and some had fallen. The sides and front were weather-beaten and needed badly a coat of paint. But all the windows had glass and smoke curled from the chimney in a long, lazy column.

Tom Quin opened the door and teetered back and forth on unsteady legs.

"Hello, Tom," a gentle voice called from a sunlit corner.

A wry smile came on the well-shaped lips of the man. He stumbled forward and sank into a wooden chair standing by one wall.

" 'Lo, Mary," he said. He made a poor attempt at an excuse: "Got tied up in town. . . ."

THERE was nothing said on her side to that. She went on ironing, a task which his entrance had interrupted for an instant. She was using an old-fashioned hand iron and the board was set up so that she could get the most out of the sunlight. When it got dark she would have to iron by kerosene lamp. She needed glasses but she hated to tell Tom that.

Quinn rested for a moment while she continued with her task, then rose and walked to her side. He moved with a little surer pace now.

"Uh, Mary. . . ." he began.

Her head did not lift from her task, but her lips said:

"Yes, Tom. . . . ?"

"I got some good news, honey," he said.

Her hand stopped its motion and her head lifted slowly. She faced him, her eyes narrowed slightly, searching the truth in his face.

"Uh, huh," he said. "Tomorrow. Gonna get some money. Enough so we and the kid can get out of this hell-hole and start somewhere else."

"We don't have to move anywhere else," she said. "This town's good enough. It was good enough for your father who had a name for the things a man should stand for. It's good enough for his son, if he wants it that way."

She said it slowly, carefully. And her eyes never left off their searching look. She had already seen the bleared look in his eyes, had smelled the sour odor of his breath, and knew that Tom Quin was well in his cups. Her breath caught for a moment so that she gasped in a sigh. For an instant she had thought he was speaking the truth. Slowly the thin shoulders bent again and her hand took up the iron. But before she could begin his fingers took hold of her wrist.

"I'm tellin' the truth, Mary," he said. "Tomorrow. Five hundred dollars. . . ."

"TOM!" her voice held a terrible fear. "Who is giving you that kind of money? For what?" She was facing him now and every inch of her was demanding an answer.

He evaded a direct reply with not only his eyes but his body. He turned from her and mumbled a something about, "being hungry. . . ."

"Never mind your belly," she said. "Who's giving you that money and for what?"

"I can't say," he said. "But I'm gettin it. Now I need some food. . . . Aah! Better make it some drink. I'm gettin' thirsty again."

He had already started in a weaving walk toward that part of the room which served as a communal bedroom, a curtained alcove-like section which held their bed and cot for their son, Johnny. Tom shoved the curtain aside, staggered over to the bed and fell face down on it. The woman followed him, her head moving slowly from side to side in pity. She unlaced his shoes and took them off. She knew he was asleep the instant she touched him. And from long years of life with him she knew that he would sleep until his belly craved food, which would be a matter of an hour or two.

She was still shaking her head as she returned to her ironing. And once again there was an interruption. This time it was a young voice, eager, excited:

"Mom! Mo-om! Look! Mister Golem. . . ."

THERE were only a few days in a year which could be called red-letter days, days which held a surcease from toil, days which held a small measure of peace and contentment. Of them all, few as they were, the day when old Jim Golem brought his circus to town

was the brightest day. Her eyes were gleaming in happiness and her figure no longer stooped as she turned to the voice and figures outlined in the doorway.

"Hiya, Mary!" a hoarse voice boomed.

There was goodness and unrestrained joy in the voice. It was as if the exuberance of the voice was a true index of the character of the man. He strode into the room, a tall man, heavy, thick-shouldered and strong-legged. He stepped to her side and threw his arms around her, bellowing as he did:

"Always have to come back to my sweetheart, don't I? Don't I?" he demanded as he swept her off her feet and whirled her around until she was both a little breathless and a trifle dizzy.

"Please!" she begged quickly, though with a smile on her lips. "Let me down, you fool."

He still held her as he did and for seconds they only stared at each other in the pure joy of seeing each other again. It was he who broke the silence:

"Well. Let's not just stand around. How's about some coffee? And Johnny says he's starving."

The three moved into the kitchen, the other of the two rooms which was all the house contained. There was a large wood-burning stove along one wall. Beside it, stacked in neat rows, were several cords of logs. The woman shoved at the tall man with the mop of silver hair until she got him to sit in one of the three chairs. Johnny still bubbling excitedly of how he had found Golem, fell into the second of the chairs. The woman busied herself at the stove.

"Hey!" Golem said suddenly. "Where's Tom?"

Her back was to him. He couldn't possibly have seen her face. Or seen the shadow which came into her eyes at the mention of her husband's name. It must have been the sudden stiffening of her shoulders, then, that told him something was amiss.

"Drunk, eh?" he said in a lower tone. Then remembering the boy at the table, tried to cover, "I mean, uh, inebriated. . . ."

"Drunk, Jim. Johnny knows. I've never kept it from him. Nor have I ever tried to gloss it over. He's a good boy; he understands a lot."

"And that makes things come out even," Golem said. "Where's Tom now?"

She motioned with her head toward the other room. But as Golem started to rise she stopped him:

"No. Let him sleep, the coffee's almost ready anyway."

In the meantime Johnny hadn't stopped his childish babble:

". . . . And gee! There's going to be all sorts of excitement. You bet! The Yaleys are coming to town and then there's. . . ."

The leonine head turned toward the youngster at the words. Golem hadn't been listening too well. But the single word, "Yaleys," brought his direct attention to the boy.

"Yaleys? I seem to remember something about them, Johnny. But tell me, who are the Yaleys?"

It was the woman who answered. Almost too quickly:

"Oh. You remember, Jim. That gang of rustlers from down Pima Springs way. . . ."

Golem shook his head at the information. He remembered. He remembered something else too, something the woman didn't want him to.

"Yep. I recollect. Didn't Tom have something to do, or wasn't he mixed up. . . ." he stopped suddenly. The woman had sent him a warning glance. The boy! This was something he didn't know. Golem let the subject drop for

the present. At least until Johnny left.

SHE fed her son and poured the coffee for the two of them. There wasn't much in the way of food and though Golem protested her cooking whatever there was, she did. Just as Johnny finished Golem reached into a back pocket and pulling a card from it scribbled something on the back of it.

"Here, Johnny," he said. "Remember the man you have to see?"

"Sure. You mean the man who wears his hat on the back of his head and is always smoking a cigar. . . . ?"

"Yep. Well, give this to him."

It was a pass for that evening. It also told Perkins that Johnny was a persona grata and was to be permitted full liberties.

"All right, Mary," he said after the small figure vanished. "Let's have it. Tom's been going up to Pima Springs, hasn't he?"

"Yes!" she said softly. Then, as though Golem was a straw to which she could cling, "What am I going to do? Today, only a short while ago he came to me with a fantastic story about five hundred dollars he's going to get for something. *I know* it has to do with Gert Yaley. . . ."

She was a breath away from tears and Golem realized it. He was quick to break in before she began to cry:

"Now, Mary! That won't do any good."

"I know," she said after a moment in which she managed to gain control. "But it's gotten worse. He drinks all the time now. And they have him in their power. Tom knows Gert Yaley'll buy him all the whiskey he can hold so long as he does Gert's bidding. I'm so afraid. This business of all that money. . . ."

"Y'know, Mary," Golem broke in. "It's the *darndest* thing. Frank Quin waited until he was in his middle forties until he had children. He had Tom, then the second died and with the death of the girl, Elsie Quin died. He lavished a lonely man's affection on Tom. I know how spoiled that boy was. Frank was wealthy then. But tough luck dogged him. He was proud, too proud. And his pride cost him a lot. Yes, his life. Because if he had listened to my pleadings and had taken the money I wanted to give it would have tided him over those bad years. As it was he worked himself to death and uselessly. He did it for Tom. I don't have to tell you Tom was not cast in the image of his father. Tom was Elsie.

"You didn't know Elsie. She was a beautiful woman. Frank met her back East and married her. She was not of us. There was no pioneer woman there. She loved the soft and gentle things in life, the music and laughter. And this country was hard and rough then. Much more so than now. You can see Tom in that. He gives up easily. Like her, he has no fight. . . ."

There was a silence for a short while. Golem was back in those years when he rode the range with Frank Quin, when a man carried a rifle across the saddle and a pair of six-guns swinging low against his hips. Mary Quin thought only of her husband and her love of him, of the years of pain and suffering, silent suffering, when every moment was a frustrated one because there was always the hope it would be golden, and the assay showed only lead.

". . . I think of Tom," Golem went on after a deep sigh, "in the same sense as I think of his father. Tom, too, married late in life. Thank God he married a woman who was one of us. Or, maybe; no matter. All of his life he heard of his father who was so much the man and who lived like one. Tom just couldn't. Something went out of

him. If it wasn't for you, Mary, he'd have been in prison or worse before this. Long before. . . ."

"Yeah," a hoarse voice grunted. "Sure. You might as well run me down too. An' now that you've had your say, get the hell out of here!"

IT WAS Tom Quin. He had awakened and hearing voices from the kitchen came to see who it was. Because he was in his stockinged feet they hadn't heard his approach. He stood in the doorway, tall, gaunt, hollow-cheeked and a little menacing.

"TOM!" the woman's voice was a shrill cry of anger. But mixed in it it was a deep anguish for this weakling.

"Shut up!" he raged suddenly, his face livid in anger. "Well, Golem. . . . ?"

The old man rose slowly. Tall as Quin was, Golem was taller, heavier. He stood rigid and silent for a second, then said:

"Tom, I'm past seventy. I was a young man when I rode range with your father. I left the range because I had a strange love of the circus. But I've never forgotten this place. And every year I've come back even though I can't even break clean. I come back because of you, Mary and Johnny. It's as though you were my *children.* And I have to look out for you. Many times I've offered Mary some money. She's never taken it. She too has pride. Pride of you.

"Someone else would call her a fool. Not me! I think she's the most wonderful woman I've ever known. Because you're not worthy of her pride. You're not a man! You're a rat. You've ordered me from your house. I could break every bone in your body. You know I could. It's in your eyes. I've already hurt Mary with my words. But it's time someone told you. It's only right that I should be that one. Goodbye, Mary. Remember. Whatever you want, whenever you want it, let me know. . . ."

He stepped slowly, majestically toward the lean figure in the doorway. For a second Mary held her breath. Tom hadn't made a move to step out of the way. Then she saw the lean body slump, saw the eyes shift in fright, and a lump formed in her throat as Tom suddenly retreated from the other.

This time there was no one to stop the flood of tears. She buried her face in her apron and cried with tumultuous feeling. So it was she did not see Tom go to the cabinet where his father's pistols lay and take one and put it in the waistband of his trousers. He covered it with his jacket. Then, without a look or word to the woman sitting in the chair, he strode out of the room and to the alcove where his shoes lay. There was a strange fixed look on his face as he laced them, and then, without a backward look, Tom strode from the house.

Ahead, a thin cloud of dust showed where Golem was racing toward town in his car.

Golem's keen old eyes took in the main tent already going up. He knew that the siding at the edge of town held the cars of animals and paraphernalia which made up the circus proper. He looked at his wrist watch and saw that in another half hour the riders' train would pull in. But the main part of his mind was still on the couple he had just left.

Perkins was waiting for him as he pulled up in front of the hotel. Sheriff Morley stood by Perkins' side. The three-inch butt of the cigar in the advance man's lips jutted out at an angle which was a sign of trouble to Golem's experienced eyes. And if that wasn't

"Damn you," Tom said softly, and pulled the trigger of the .44

enough the expression on Morley's face was.

"Hi, Jeb," Golem said. "Hi, Sheriff. Well, let's not cry out here in the street. My room'll be the best place for that."

Sheriff Morley straddled the chair and rested his arms on top of it. His morose look surveyed the silver-haired man sitting directly across him. Perkins sat on the overstuffed chair, the cigar still unlit and still sticking up toward his right ear.

". . . So the picture is just like that," Golem said grimly. "You think that gang is going to pick tonight for their shenanigans?"

"I'll swear on it! Like I told Jeb, they'll never have a better opportunity. Frankly, I'm scared silly. Even if I'm wrong, and they're aiming to go for the bank, there's going to be shooting. You kinda know what that could mean."

"Yes, I know. There'll be only two chances which would be best for them. One, during the performance; the second, just after it's over. If they try during the performance the streets will be clear. If after, there will be several

thousand people on the street. Now if I were this Gert Yaley, I'd figure the job out just the way we did. And I'd add up my chances. Either way they wouldn't be too good. For one thing if I tried during the performance I'd have to make sure the Sheriff wasn't too well-prepared. On the other hand, if after, I'd have to worry about all those people. Sometimes it's not too good to have too many people about. They're bound to get in the way.

"So, to carry it further, Gert, knowing the situation, would also know the Sheriff knew. Now it becomes more simple. Let the Sheriff think it's the bank. And let him plant all the deputies he wants. I'll send enough men out to make it look like the bank's the job. Instead, I'll try the cashier's cage in the circus. There'll be more ready cash and easier to get. I think that tonight I'm going to change the acts around a bit, Jeb," Golem said in conclusion.

A frown worried lines across Perkins' forehead. He wondered what was on Golem's mind. Morley too, was puzzled by the reference to the change in acts. He wondered what the circus acts had to do with the situation. Golem, however, had his say on the subject, for without another word he got up, nodded to both men and said, "Well. Better get to the lot and see how things are going."

THERE were some twenty riders in the group which pulled into town just as dusk was falling. They rode in from a direction opposite from Pima Springs. At their head rode a wiry Mexican whose face was highlighted by a scar which rode at an angle across his entire face. They came in silently, and only the clop-clop of their horses' hooves advertised their coming. Nor did they, as the other horsemen, tether their horses to the hitching posts provided by the saloons and stores for such purposes.

With the coming of dusk the last of the people who had come from ranches as much as twenty miles away, had found the midway or were already gathered in the main tent, waiting for the circus to begin. The streets were empty but for some few drunks and for the few who still remained at the bars of the saloons. But here and there, particularly near the Cattleman's Trust, were men in groups of two. They stood in the darkened lobbies of stores, or lounged in areaways, out of sight of those on the street. They were all armed, some with rifles, some with sawed-off shotguns, and a few with six-guns.

A man came staggering down the street. He was tall and thin. He walked down the very middle of the street, as though he had lost the sidewalk or found it wasn't wide enough for him. He staggered past the bank for some twenty feet, then stopping, his head bent low, started back. But as he reached a point opposite the bank he turned and staggered up the sidewalk and collapsed against the side of the red-brick building.

It was Tom Quin. And he was a long cry from being as drunk as he played at being. He had walked past the bank as he did for a good reason. He had seen the men lounging in doorways before the building. It was the reason he had gone past. He saw the others on the far side of the bank. Ramon and his men were going into a trap.

But Tom didn't know about Ramon. He thought it was going to be Gert Yaley that was coming in. His throat tightened in fear. Five hundred dollars was a lot of money. But it wasn't going to do a dead man any good. Tom had

(Continued on page 182)

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

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(Continued from page 180)

agreed to act as lookout for the gang. Well, he had seen. Now it was his duty to warn them. Suddenly an idea flashed across his mind. There was going to be a bedlam of shooting. The circus was a short way off. People were going to stampede. . . . Anger burned a red film across his eyes. Old man Golem! That prying old man! He had threatened him, called him a coward. Well, he'd show him. Five hundred, Tom snorted to himself. Why, he was going to ten times that before the night was over and no one would be the wiser.

Still pretending drunkenness, Tom arose and staggered off in the direction of the circus lot. Nor did any of the watchers think it strange. . . .

THE spotlight picked up the rider on the snow-white stallion and highlighted him into the center of the arena. The rider took off the coal-black sombrero he was wearing and waved it aloft. His silver hair gleamed brightly in the glow of the spot. The hanging mikes picked up his voice and carried it to the farthest reaches of the huge tent:

"Ladies and gentlemen. Because of an unforeseen situation, we have had to change the sequence of our acts. The rodeo part will not be done in full. . . . However, at the conclusion of the bulldogging, I request you remain seated as the management has another feature it has in store for you. It will be signalled by the sound of gunfire from *outside* the tent. . . . And now, it's *rodeo time. . . . !*"

The rider rode off to a tremendous burst of applause. The lights went on and the rodeo was on. . . .

Golem trotted off and the flap of the tent closed behind him. He leaped from the stallion with all the verve of a man

(Continued on page 184)

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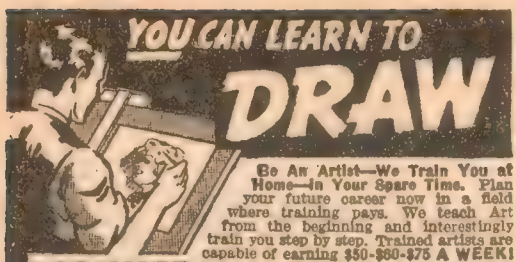

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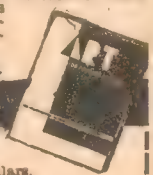

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(Continued from page 182)

thirty years his junior. Morley and Perkins were waiting for him.

"Everything set?" Golem asked.

"Yeah. We got men watching the bank from all sides. How are you set?"

"My men are all mounted and ready and *armed*. Every one of them knows the danger and they all said the same thing, 'to hell with it!' I've just left enough performers to put on a show. There'll be forty of the best shots in the world riding to Pima Springs tonight. That is if Yaley acts like I think he will."

"Good," the Sheriff chortled. "Now we don't have to be afraid the sound of gunfire will set off a riot."

"What about the cashier?" Perkins asked.

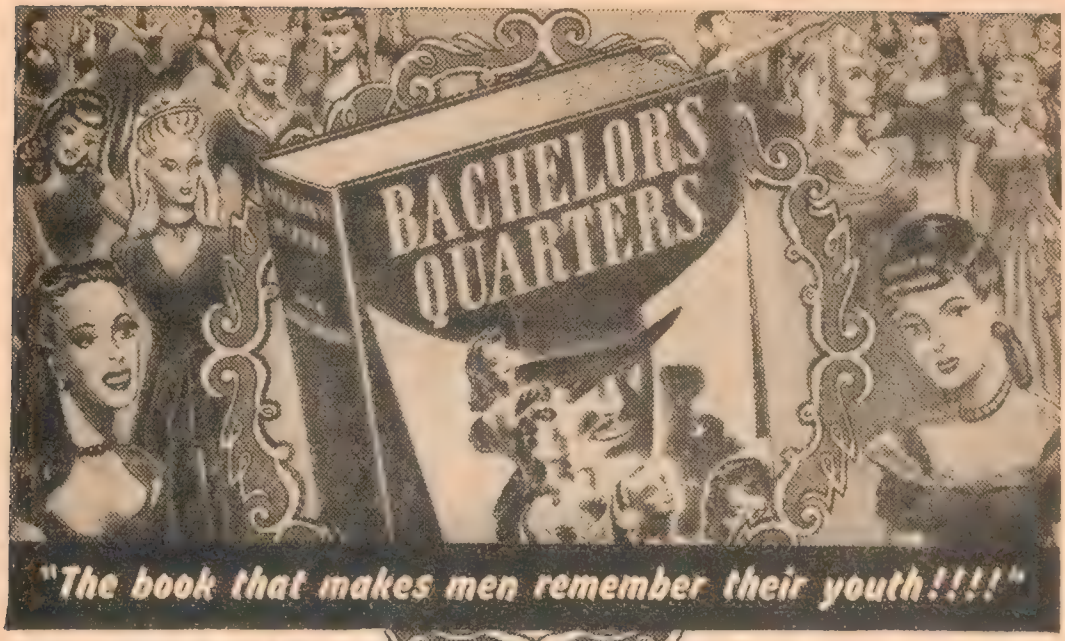
"Don't worry about that," Golem said. "I've prepared for any emergency."

But he hadn't. Neither had Morley. They had figured Gert Yaley's moves almost to the last. But they didn't know about the twenty men he had planted in the audience. Nor what their instructions were. They were soon to find out.

"Hey boss!" a uniformed roustabout dashed into their midst, shouted. Sweat streamed down his cheeks and his eyes were wild. "It's a 'hey, rube!'"

Golem didn't wait to hear more. With Perkins and Morley hard at his heels he dashed out. The ring had been cleared and set up for the rodeo. But nothing was going on. They could *hear* the reason for it the instant they entered the arena. And also see it. It seemed that the whole vast stretch of tent was a boiling cauldron of fighting men. From everywhere men shouted and swung at each other. Children yelled and women were screaming. Morley and Golem sized up the situation at a glance. Already the men of the

(Continued on page 186)



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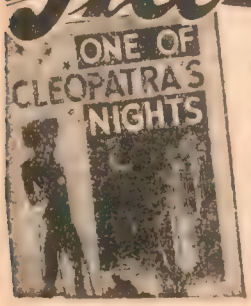

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(Continued from page 184)

circus and rodeo were at work, boring in to the centers of the disturbances. But it was evident they had been well organized.

Morley began to bellow for his deputies:

"Jack! Larsen! Get men up there and break it up. Clubs. No firing. . . ."

At the same time at the very instant Morley was shouting for his deputies, the broken sound of many guns going off was to be heard as from a distance.

Golem's head came up at the sound. The trap at the bank had been sprung. But he had no time for investigation. This was serious. Another had heard the sound also. Tom Quin.

Tom had found the cashier's wagon. It was still alight. And from behind another wagon, Tom could see that there was still someone inside. He could hear the excited shouts of the crowd in the main tent. Suddenly the shouts took on an added tone. Men in the dress of the circus appeared and began to bawl for help, and others, at the sound of the call for help, came running from all sides.

Tom Quin knew this was the moment he had waited for.

Like a shadow he slid from the dark protection of the wagon, his right hand pulling the old-time forty-four from the waistband of his trousers. His face was a tightly drawn mask of something that was both fear and terror. His hand was so tight against the stock of the pistol it was quivering. And his legs had a rubbery feeling. He moved against the wagon in a sliding motion until he was at the two steps which led up to the interior.

HIS head jerked sideways at the sound of a voice from within. It was a familiar voice. Then his face

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twisted in a terrible grimace. No longer did he care about concealment. Hanson, Yaley's right hand man, was in there. . . .

He took the two steps in a single leap, jerked the door open and stood tense on the threshold, his body bent and the gun held low almost at his hip. There was a man on the floor. He was dead, the hilt of a bowie knife protruding from his throat. Hanson was bent over the cash cage, one hand deep in its vitals. By his side were several sacks. Hanson turned at the sound of Quin's entry.

"Quin!" he shouted. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Damn you," Tom said softly, and pulled the trigger of the forty-four. The roar of the gun set off a thousand echoing explosions in the wagon. Tom pulled the trigger once again and another leaden messenger found a resting place in Hanson's body. Hanson gurgled chokingly, bloody froth appeared on his lips, and with a tired motion his body slid along the edge of the cage and collapsed to the floor in a bloody bundle.

It was instinct, the sudden inexplicable feeling he wasn't alone which made Tom Quin turn. There are times when fear, hate, love, all the ingredients which make for turmoil of the mind, come upon one and simply stop all the orderly processes of thought. The sight of the two men in the doorway did that to Tom Quin. His reaction was automatic and instant. The gun in his hand simply made another of its terrifying explosions. And suddenly a horrible bloom appeared where the right eye of Bud Yaley had been. It was red-rimmed and blossomed in a shower of scarlet. His head snapped back against the jamb of the door with an odd spattering sound. For where the back of the head

(Continued on page 188)

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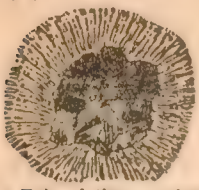

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had once been was now a jagged-edged bloody hole.

It was the last mortal act of Tom Quin. For the echo of his last shot had barely died when a new series of roaring sounds shattered the interior. This time it was the staccato firing of Gert Yaley's gun. Four shots and each of them found a target in the slender body of Tom Quin. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Gert Yaley was heavy-set, thick-bodied. But he acted with the speed and quickness of a trained athlete as he leaped past the body of Tom Quin. A single motion and he had scooped up the sacks which were on the cage and stuffed them into his pockets. Then whirling he sped out of the door and into the welcoming darkness. There were a half dozen mounted men waiting for him. Yaley vaulted into the saddle and in a second they were off in a cloud of dust, their horses spurred on by roweling heels.

Gower Yaley rode alongside his brother and shouted above the pounding hoofs:

"Where's Bud and Hanson?"

"Dead. That lousy double-crosser, Quin did them in. But I got him. . . ."

GOLEM and Morley standing tense beside each other and watching the deputies and men of the circus weed out the men who were creating the riot in the stands, heard the shots from outside. They looked at each other wonderingly, and as one, bolted for the doorway. Their worst fears had been realized. Gert Yaley had outsmarted them. He had set off a riot in the tent, knowing that in the confusion, Golem and the Sheriff would be too busy to think of what was going on outside.

They were just in time to see the horsemen ride off. While the Sheriff

ran to the money wagon, Golem made haste for a shed which had been utilized for carpentry work. Golem had an ace in the hole there. There was a man waiting. He was standing just within the partly opened door waiting for Golem.

"Get it off, Will!" Golem yelled.

As though the man had all the time in the world, he knelt by the side of a rocket that was aimed at a hole in the roof and set fire to the fuse. There was a blistering sound and a small tail of sparks marked the rocket's exist.

"Whew!" Golem said heavily. "That should do it."

There were two groups of men bordering the road that led over the hills from Blister Creek to Pima Springs. The leader of each group noticed the rocket soaring into the deep blue of the star-lit heavens. At a silent signal several of the men prepared the portable searchlights and swung them inward toward anyone coming from Blister Creek. Then the leaders of each group sent two of their men down the road a couple of hundred yards. It was a matter of waiting then. . . .

Nor had they too long to wait. In a short while the hard-driving sound of horses being galloped at top speed came to their ears. Instantly every one but those manning the searchlights leaped on the horses tethered near by. The mounted men strung themselves just on the outer edge of the underbrush and waited.

The galloping sounds came closer, closer, and then there was added to that sound two others, the sounds of pistols being fired. It was the signal they had been awaiting.

Two broad beams of white light, fiercely revealing, sprang into life and centered a path down the very center of the road, turning the darkness into a semblance of day. And directly into

(Continued on page 190)

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the gleaming path rode eight men, at their head Gert and Gower Yaley. Then, like an avalanche, the men in ambush at the side of the road appeared. Shouts of command split the night, cries of, "Halt!"

But the Yaleys swept on.

There were no more shouts then. Nothing but the booming sounds of rifles. As if by magic, there were empty saddles among the eight, six of them. Only Gert Yaley bore a charmed life. Again the rifles barked. And again. But still he rode on. He was almost level with the searchlights, another ten yards and he would be out of range. And suddenly his horse shied, moved his head from side to side and before Gert could do more than saw on the reins, plunged directly into one of the searchlights. There was a terrible screaming sound, the crash of glass, then silence. Not a single one of the pursuers ever knew whether it had been the horse or the man that had screamed so. But when they arrived on the scene it was to find Gert Yaley's head in the huge mouth of the searchlight, as if it were a giant's maw which had swallowed him. His head was almost severed from his body and slivers of glass stuck out of his face like porcupine's quills.

GOLEM, Perkins and Morley looked down at the scene of carnage in the money wagon. A sorrowful look was in the old man's eyes. The cashier had been one of the oldest employees of the circus. Golem had told the man to give up the sacks. There wouldn't be any money in them anyway. Golem had made sure all the cash had been stowed in his personal quarters.

". . . Knifed from behind," Morley said. "That's like Hanson. Couldn't do anything unless a man's back was to him. But Tom . . ." he shook his

head in bewilderment. ". . . Who'd of thought it of Tom Quin. Guess he got wind of it and tried to do it all by himself. Got Hanson and Bud Yaley at that. . . ."

"A mighty fancy job of shootin'," Perkins said. "Too bad we got here so late. Mighta been alive then."

"Yes," Golem said. "He might have."

But there was a strange look in his eyes as he said it.

"Gonna hate to tell Mary," Morley said. "She's a mighty fine woman."

"I'll tell her," Golem said. "It's only right."

* * *

Golem turned and walked back to the main tent. Very soon the rest of his men would be back. But he wasn't thinking of them. His thoughts were on a little boy who was probably still in the big tent somewhere. He called one of his men over and told him to page young Johnny and bring him to where Golem was waiting.

Johnny's eyes were alight in remembrance of all the excitement. Never had there been a circus like this. He was breathing heavily and he ran to the tall man in the silver hair and threw his arms around him.

"Gee, Uncle Golem! That was the most excitin' thing . . ."

The old man found a chair and dragging it over seated himself and took the youngster on his lap. He held him close for a moment, then began to talk:

"Son, I got some bad news for you. I know you're going to take it like a man. And when you hear me out, you're going to be proud . . . Johnny! Your father tried to stop some bad men from holding up the cashier's wagon. He did all right. He killed two of them. But a skunk shot him before he had

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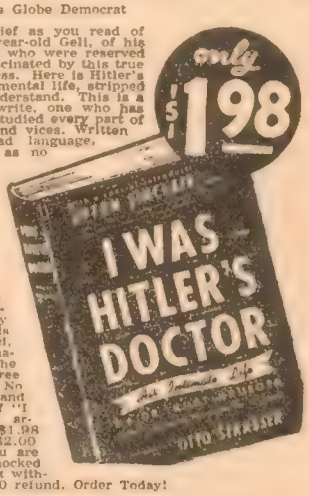

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another chance to fire. Yep, Johnny. Your dad was a hero and Blister Creek is never going to forget it. But, Johnny boy, your dad, may he rest in peace was . . ."

Golem saw the lump form in the boy's throat, saw the eyes moisten and suddenly clasped the youngster close to his broad chest. But the boy didn't cry. After a second Johnny shoved himself away and said:

"I'm all right. Besides, I don't think dad would have liked it if I cried."

"No," said Golem, "I don't think he would. And now, we got to go to your mother and tell her. And remember, son, she's only got you left. No. She's got you and me left. She won't have to worry no more. . . ."

THE END

GOLD RUSH TOWN

By PETE GRIM

IN 1846, the town of San Francisco had a population of two hundred. It grew normally and rationally for a couple of years, until the discovery of gold in California, at which time the population was just over eight hundred.

When news came of the placer mines, the town practically emptied. Stores were closed, all normal activities were neglected, and everyone who possibly could, proceeded to go and help himself to the gold which was so easily had at the beginning. Since there was so little attention to merchandising in the town, the prices of necessities rose tremendously. The few men left to work asked and received ten to twenty dollars a day for any kind of labor.

After a short experience in the mines, most of the merchants returned to San Francisco to their shops, and prepared to make a fortune dealing in supplies for the miners. Gold began to pour into the town to buy equipment for the prospectors, two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the first two months of the gold rush, six hundred thousand dollars in the following two months. This was in the latter part of 1848.

By the beginning of 1849 the news of the gold had spread across the nation, and the immigrants began to arrive in ever-increasing numbers. Upon the little city built to accommodate eight hundred people, there descended in the first half of 1849 ten thousand people. They wanted food, temporary shelter, mining outfits, transportation to the placers. In the last six months of the year,

the extraordinary number of thirty thousand more people dumped themselves into the chaos.

Shelter was crude, and of all sorts, but tents predominated. Sheds and shacks of various kinds were constructed as fast as workmen and materials could be obtained. People crowded into these new-made hotels and lodging houses, and paid enormous prices for the privilege of sleeping on a hard cot in a room containing ten or twenty other sleepers.

A memorable aspect of the city at that time was the condition of the streets. Ankle-deep in dust they were in the dry season, dust raised by the winds into a perpetual cloud hanging over everything. They were even worse in the rainy season, being practically neck-deep in mud. Horses and wagons floundered hopelessly along, and the mud was an ever-present nuisance to all.

Prices skyrocketed higher and higher. Equipment which the miners needed sold at outlandish prices. A quarter was the smallest coin in circulation, and the least price anything sold for. Bread was fifty cents a loaf. A good pair of boots cost a hundred dollars. Real estate joined the parade of fabulous prices.

San Francisco was a hectic place in 1849. The population was a heterogeneous mixture from everywhere in the world. Everyone was in a hurry, either to get to the mines, or to make the most of his boundless opportunities for money-making in the city.

The greatest money-makers of all were the saloons and gambling places. In only a few months time, some of them became quite magnificent, sporting mirrors, oil paintings, prism chandeliers, and so forth. The gambling tables were always crowded, and sometimes the bets were enormous.

As the fabulous year wore on, and excessive autumn and winter rains made slimy oceans of mud in the streets, conditions in San Francisco became decidedly uncomfortable. Cholera and fever spread in the overcrowded city. Undesirable elements among the immigrants began increasing in number, as hoodlums and criminals of various kinds were attracted to this maelstrom of humanity so ripe for their talents. The city government tightened and expanded its activities, and in the permanent community was born a spirit of cheerfulness in surmounting obstacles and hardships, no matter how great, a spirit which has never died.

That spirit was soon to be tried to the utmost. Within eighteen months, the city was burned to the ground no less than six times. The first conflagration occurred December 4, 1849. It started in a saloon, and did a million dollars worth of damage. The ramshackle buildings and canvas covered shacks were soon replaced. But fire followed disastrous fire, in spite of the indomitable spirit of the people in rebuilding that which they had lost. Finally, a volunteer fire department was organized, and fire-fighting equipment purchased.

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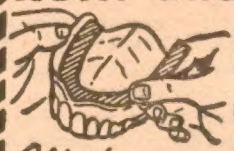

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